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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXV.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,

98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., November 5, 1884.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 315

FLUSH FRED'S DOUBLE; Or, THE SQUATTERS' LEAGUE OF SIX.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "MISSISSIPPI MOSE," "BUCK FARLEY," "BILL, THE BLIZZARD," ETC., ETC., ETC.



A MOMENT OF DEEP SUSPENSE FOLLOWED: THE HUSHED CROWD WAITED WITH BATED BREATH.

Flush Fred's Double;

OR,

The Squatters' League of Six.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "LOGGER LEM," "HEMLOCK HANK,"
"FLUSH FRED," "MONTANA NAT,"
"BILL, THE BLIZZARD,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FINDING HIS FOE.

"THAT is a wonderful hand, to come by chance."

"Yes, it is the king of the deck."

"I know a man who can show such a hand as that whenever he wants to; but he is the only one."

It was on board the good steamer Cyclone, bound down the Mississippi, and then a little distance below Natchez.

Night had come, and supper was over, and most of the male passengers had betaken themselves to the Social Hall, the space at the forward end of the cabin that included the clerk's office and the bar.

Some were conversing there, some were lounging about, some were drinking at the bar, and some were playing cards at convenient tables.

One of the tables was occupied by a party of four men, well dressed and of gentlemanly appearance.

Two of them may have been professional gamblers; but, if they were so, there was nothing in their manner or in the game they played to indicate their occupation.

There was no question about the others, one of them being known as a planter of western Louisiana, and the other as a merchant of New Orleans.

They had been playing poker—a friendly game, so-called—at small stakes and evidently for the purpose of pastime, as the fluctuations of the game had yielded no gains or losses worth mentioning.

At last the planter had laid down an immense hand—the ace, king, queen, jack and ten of spades, which at once provoked exclamations of astonishment from the others.

He had not raked in the small pot which the hand had won, but sat looking at the cards which he had thrown face upward on the table, with a frown on his face.

"Pick up your money, Major Chappelle, and let the deal pass," said the man who had remarked that the hand was a wonderful one, and who was one of the two who might possibly have been professional gamblers.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Sinnott, I was thinking. The pot does not belong to me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That is a wonderful hand, as you say, to have come by chance. Yes, it would be wonderful if it had come by chance. But it didn't. It was a purely scientific operation. I made that hand."

"Put it up, you mean, I suppose," remarked another. "When did you learn the business, Major Chappelle?"

The planter was a tall, heavily built, and fine-looking gentleman of middle age, with streaks of gray in his dark hair and heavy mustache, and with the appearance of one who was accustomed to having his person and authority respected.

No one would for a moment have supposed him to be an adept in the art of cheating at cards.

Several of the other passengers in the Social Hall, attracted by the conversation, had come forward and were standing about the table, gazing at the phenomenal hand.

There was a bitter smile on Major Chappelle's face as he answered:

"I began to learn it nearly a year ago, and now I have mastered the business, or so much of it. I have never made a dollar at it, and never shall; but you see what I can do. It cost me twenty thousand dollars to learn that trick."

"Twenty thousand ducats!" exclaimed Sinnott. "Deuced expensive education! How many teachers did you have?"

"Only one, and he did not teach me; he compelled me to teach myself."

"How was that?"

"I fell in with a gambler, who was also a thief, but a gentleman in appearance and manners. He quite impressed me with his pleasant and agreeable ways. We began a game of poker, which I supposed to be a fair and friendly game, and finally he won twenty thousand from me on exactly the same hand that I have shown you. I did not suspect the swindle until he had got away. When I became convinced of it I vowed that I would kill on sight the scoundrel who robbed me. I also set to work to learn how he had stacked the cards to produce that hand, and, after devoting a great deal of time to that branch of the black art, I

succeeded in doing the trick, and you have seen how accomplished I am."

"You tell me, Mr. Sinnott, that you knew one man who could show such a hand whenever he chose. Who was he?"

"He was a gambler on the river, one of the high-art style, who only worked the best boats. He is out of the business now—married rich, I believe. A splendid fellow, major—high-toned, gentlemanly, and capital company."

"What is his name?"

"Fred Henning—better known as Flush Fred."

Major Chappelle shook his head.

"That was not the name of the fellow who swindled me," he said. "My scoundrel called himself Muggridge."

Suddenly the major stiffened himself in the chair, with his hands on the arms. His face turned red, and his eyes blazed, as he looked down the cabin.

"There comes the villain, now!" he exclaimed, in a low tone of intense but suppressed passion.

The others turned and followed his gaze, and the sensation increased when they discovered its object.

Up the cabin, with firm and graceful step, walked a man whose appearance indicated that he was not more than thirty years of age, though the real figure was a few points higher than that.

In face and form he was an attractive and noticeable young man, with dark hair and eyes, a fine mustache, and a general air of good breeding and good temper.

His attire bespoke a man well-to-do in the world, assured of his position, and satisfied with it. Plain, but elegant, every detail indicated good taste, as well as the possession of ample means.

He may have looked the least bit surprised or displeased when he perceived that the general gaze was fastened on him; but his countenance lighted up as he caught sight of some old acquaintances, and he smilingly advanced to meet them.

Major Chappelle had quietly risen from his chair and edged around the table, as if he wished to have no barrier between himself and his foe.

Before the young man who had come up the cabin could greet his friends, the angry planter stepped forward and faced him.

"So, you scoundrel," he growled, "I have found you at last!"

"Sir!" haughtily exclaimed the young man, as his smile gave way to a frown.

"Oh, you needn't sir me. I have caught you, and now I mean to settle with you."

"Are you really speaking to me, sir? I don't know you."

"Very convenient for you to deny that knowledge, I dare say. But I know you. Your name is Muggridge, and you are the scoundrel who swindled me out of twenty thousand dollars about a year ago."

"There is some mistake here," quietly replied the other. "Jack Sinnott, do you know this man?"

"I do. He is Major Chappelle, a thoroughly responsible gentleman."

"Is he in his right mind?"

"As fully as any of us."

"Then he has got a wrong idea into his head. Perhaps you will do me the kindness to inform him that I am no Muggridge, but Fred Henning, with whom several of the gentlemen I see here are well acquainted."

"It won't do, sir!" thundered Major Chappelle. "Whatever you may now call yourself, or whatever your real name may be, you were Muggridge when you met me on the Caddo Belle and cheated me out of twenty thousand dollars."

"The Caddo Belle?" answered Fred Henning, seeming to reflect. "That used to be one of my favorite boats when I was on the river. But I am almost sure, sir, that I never saw you before. I have a very good memory for faces, but have not the faintest remembrance of yours. I never went by the name of Muggridge, and I never cheated you or any other man out of twenty thousand dollars."

Major Chappelle was very red in the face, and his entire manner spoke of repressed wrath.

There could be no doubt that he regarded the denial of the other as a sneaking subterfuge, or a brazen attempt to lie himself out of the offense that had been fastened upon him.

But he restrained himself, as if for the purpose of making the confusion of the other the more complete.

"Of course you will deny your dirty work," he said, with a bitter sneer. "Look at the cards that are turned up on the table. That is exactly the hand you dealt yourself when you robbed me of twenty thousand dollars."

Flush Fred smiled as his gaze took in the royal sequence flush.

"That used to be a favorite hand of mine," said he. "I admit that I have often played it. But I never played it on you, sir, and you are making a strange mistake when you accuse me of robbing you."

"You are a liar!" shouted the major.

The frown came again and deepened on Fred Henning's face; but he did not move a muscle. All the bystanders wondered at his calmness and self-control.

"I think you had better take that back," he mildly remarked. "I assure you that you are mistaken."

"I know that I am not mistaken. Are you a coward, then, as well as a thief and a liar?"

CHAPTER II.

FORCED INTO A DUEL.

ALL present looked closely at Flush Fred, doubtless expecting him to resent immediately the intolerable insult that had been put upon him.

He did resent it, and quick enough to satisfy the most exacting fire-eater.

Not with a blow, but in a manner that was quite as effective, though less brutal.

Even under that provocation he seemed to consider the years of his insult, and it may be presumed that he also considered the insult as the result of a mistake.

His right hand flew out, and administered to Major Chappelle's left cheek a slap that resounded through the cabin.

The major's fury flamed up in his face, and his anger incited him to instant and violent action. He snatched a pistol from his pocket, and leveled it at the young man; but he was quickly seized by more than one of the bystanders, and the shot was not fired.

Perhaps they may have not believed that his cause was sufficiently clear to compel a resort to such an extreme measure.

Captain Gemmill, the commander of the Cyclone, also stepped forward promptly, to quell the disturbance and keep the peace on his boat.

"Stop that!" shouted the captain. "Put up your weapons, gentlemen! I won't allow any fighting on this boat. If you have any quarrel to do, I will land at a wood-yard in the morning, and you can go ashore and settle it."

Major Chappelle raved and fumed, but was soon quieted by his companions when he perceived that he had no immediate opportunity of wreaking his revenge.

Flush Fred, who was quite calm and composed, walked away with his friend, Jack Sinnott, and entered into an earnest conversation with him.

Others surrounded the major, sympathizing with him, and abundantly proffering advice.

Some of them were of the opinion that though there were circumstances that favored his accusation, Henning might have been justified in his denial. They believed Flush Fred to be a truthful man, as men go, and knew that he was then considered a gentleman of wealth and position.

It was their judgment, under the circumstances, that the major would be justified in treating him as an equal, if not under obligation to do so.

Thus it was that shortly after the encounter Fred received a challenge from Major Chappelle—verbal, but sufficient.

He accepted it promptly, and named Jack Sinnott as his second.

Pistols were settled upon as the weapons, and the next landing of the Cyclone at a wood-yard as the time and place.

It was agreed that the combatants should be placed back to back, revolver in hand, and at the word should each step ten paces forward. Then, at the word, they were to wheel and fire at will.

"I am afraid that those are hard terms for you, Fred," said his second. "Major Chappelle has the reputation of being a splendid pistol-shot."

"The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," answered Fred. "I know that I have right on my side. He may believe that he has; but I am sure that I have."

After the acceptance of the challenge each of the principals passed some time in the cabin, writing.

Flush Fred wrote a long letter, which he sealed and directed to:

"MRS. FRED HENNING,

"Gravelly Bayou, near Vidalia, La."

He wrote carefully on another paper, and called upon two gentlemen to witness his signature.

"This is my will," he said, as he handed it with the letter to Jack Sinnott. "If I fall, I want you to take these and deliver them to my wife. You will find money enough on my person to defray all expenses."

Then he retired to his state-room, and slept peacefully and soundly.

In the morning, agreeably to the captain's promise, the Cyclone was landed at a wood-yard.

Not that she was specially in need of wood; but a few cords were taken on, to give a color of business to the real purpose of the landing, which was to accommodate the duelists and their friends.

Captain Gemmill deserved the reputation he had gained of being a very accommodating officer.

Though it was not yet breakfast-time, nearly all the passengers were up and about.

The quarrel and its proximate result had speedily been communicated through the cabin, and the female portion of the passengers were doubtless as fully aware of the circumstances as the male.

Most of the male element accompanied the combatants ashore, and most of the female contingent secured advantageous places on the guards or the burricane-deck, so that they could at least see the departure of the duelists.

Two young ladies, seated at the forward end of the starboard guard, leaned over the railing, and eagerly watched the men as they filed over the plank and up the bank.

"Oh, Mamie dear, what a handsome fellow!" exclaimed one, as Fred Henning left the boat.

"Hush, Sue! Don't speak so loud. He might hear you."

"I wouldn't care if he did. He is just lovely—my ideal of a man—and I pray that he will not be killed in the fight."

"You may as well moderate your transports, my dear. He is well-looking enough, but I understand that he is a married man."

"Oh, I hope he isn't. He would be such a splendid prize for the girls to fight for."

"Including yourself, I suppose. I am told, Sue, that he is a gambler, and that he is accused of swindling."

"I don't believe he is guilty, though he can swindle anybody if he wants to. He could swindle me, I know."

Major Chappelle had varied his writing the night before with libations at the bar, not extensive, but rather frequent.

Fred Henning, preferring to keep his head clear and his nerves quiet, had not touched liquor.

In the morning the major refreshed himself freely before starting; but Fred was content with water.

There was a physician on the Cyclone—indeed, there was seldom a full complement of passengers on a Mississippi steamboat that did not include a medical man—and he accompanied the combatants to the field.

Captain Gemmill also joined the party, perhaps because he considered all the performances of his passengers in a measure under his control—perhaps because he simply wanted to see the fight.

The field of battle was soon selected.

It was an open space in the forest, in sight of the steamer.

Before proceedings were begun, Fred Henning made a final attempt to settle the difficulty without bloodshed.

He spoke apart to Jack Sinnott, his second, who then conferred with Major Chappelle's second.

Then that gentleman informed his principal that the other side, in view of their belief that the affair arose out of a mistake, had suggested that full explanations might lead to an amicable arrangement.

"No!" thundered the wrathful planter, in tones that were undoubtedly intended to reach the ears of his antagonist.

"No, sir, I say! I want no explanations, and have heard lies enough. I have shown that rascal too much favor in giving him a meeting on a fair field, and now I shall not allow him to lie out of it or to sneak out of it. The affair must go on."

Flush Fred heard this plainly enough, and his face turned a shade paler; but otherwise he showed no emotion.

The seconds paced off a line on the level ground, and tossed for the word.

Jack Sinnott won.

The conditions of the combat were finally explained to the principals, who were placed back to back on the measured line.

A cocked revolver was handed to each, and Jack Sinnott took his station opposite to them, the other spectators remaining at a respectful distance, and carefully keeping out of the line of fire.

A moment of deep suspense followed; the hushed crowd waited with bated breath; then, at the word the duelists walked steadily away from each other, stepping off ten nearly equal paces.

Major Chappelle, who was evidently somewhat excited, walked a little faster than his antagonist, reaching the limit of his pacing a trifle the sooner.

Consequently he was obliged to wait for the word to wheel and fire.

When both were fairly in their positions, Sinnott gave the word sharply.

They seemed to wheel simultaneously; but Fred Henning's movement was a shade quicker than that of the other.

He fired instantly, and Major Chappelle's pistol-arm dropped—his revolver, harmlessly discharged, falling to the ground.

As there could be no doubt that he was winged, Fred would not press his advantage by firing again, and lowered his weapon.

But the major was mad with rage and mortification. In spite of his helpless arm, from which the blood was flowing freely, he insisted that the fight should go on.

"Give me my pistol!" he roared. "My left arm is good enough. I will get even with that scoundrel yet. He took a mean advantage of me."

But his second and other friends resolutely opposed his insane desire, assuring him that his opponent, so far from having taken an advantage of him, had refused to use the advantage that he had gained by his quick and accurate shot.

The physician inspected the major's arm and declared that he was in no condition to continue the combat; so the planter reluctantly submitted to the authority of his friends, if not to their advice, and was led back to the boat, followed by the rest of the party.

As they came down the bank they were watched by the two young ladies who had commented upon their departure.

"Look, Mamie!" exclaimed the elder but more enthusiastic of the two. "It is the old gentleman who is hurt. Oh, I am so glad!"

"Glad that he is hurt?"

"No—glad that the other is not hurt."

"I don't see that it makes any difference to us, my dear. They are both married men."

"What a pity! But it is a great blessing that neither of them was killed."

"Yes—to their wives."

Major Chappelle was taken into his state-room and attended by the physician, and the Cyclone was backed out and headed downstream again.

CHAPTER III.

"HAVE I A DOUBLE?"

WHILE the planter lay in his state-room, suffering in mind and body, the feeling among the passengers gradually turned against him; or perhaps it would be more proper to say that the feeling turned in favor of his young antagonist.

Fred Henning told his story freely and plainly, but without saying anything that could cast blame upon Major Chappelle.

That gentleman he accused merely of having made a mistake, and declared himself able to convince him of the mistake if he could get an opportunity for explanation.

The young man's word was generally accepted by those who knew him, and his statements were so circumstantial and apparently so well supported, that they carried conviction to the minds of those who heard him; consequently it was determined that the opportunity he desired should be afforded him.

Mr. Worsham, Major Chappelle's second, visited that gentleman's state-room, and spoke to him, gently and persuasively, concerning his late antagonist's wish to interview him for the purpose of an explanation.

The planter was fully as bitter as ever against the ex-gambler, and objected strongly to the attempt to arrange an interview, but was finally induced to consent to see his foe.

"There has been no mistake," he declared.

"I am sure that I am not mistaken. He is the man who swindled me. But you may let him come in, and I will listen to him as patiently as I can. I want you to stay here, Worsham, so that if I become excited or tired of him, you can see to it that he goes out. I am not to be worried, mind."

"You shall not be worried, major, a bit more than you are willing to stand."

Fred Henning showed no disposition to worry anybody when he came into the state-room, but was quite calm and gentle in his manner, though his reception was a gruff and surly one.

"I am very sorry that I have been drawn into a difficulty with you, Major Chappelle," said he, "and am anxious to make such explanations as shall settle it satisfactorily. I believe that I am fully able to convince you that you have made a mistake, and I naturally desire to learn how the mistake arose. I have already told you that I never passed by the name of Muggridge, and that I never robbed or defrauded you or any other person of twenty thousand dollars; but you did not believe me."

The planter growled his assent to the latter statement.

"Perhaps, major, as it seems to be necessary for me to prove an *alibi*, we may more easily come to an understanding if you will inform me and Mr. Worsham just where and when you were swindled out of that money."

"That is easy enough," answered the planter. "It is all fixed in my memory, just as I find your face. The place was the steamer Caddo Belle, on her down trip from Red river, and near New Orleans. The time was the night of the 6th of September last."

"The 6th of last September!" joyfully exclaimed Fred. "As it happens, that was the date of my marriage, and I can prove my *alibi* by a cloud of witnesses, who know that I was then far from New Orleans and up in Concordia."

"Unfortunately, none of those people are here present, though their evidence can easily be obtained; but I happen to have with me something that ought to be good evidence. It is my marriage-certificate."

Fred Henning produced a paper, which he unfolded and gave to the planter, who frowned as he perused it.

"I can't see that this proves anything," he said, as he handed it back. "It is the marriage-certificate of the Fred Henning you speak of; but how did you come by it?"

"How did I come by it? Simply by owning it, jointly with my wife, and by being the Fred Henning named in the paper."

"You were Muggridge when I met you before."

Fred was considerably taken aback, not to say angry, but he controlled himself admirably.

"You are giving me a rough deal, Major Chappelle. Don't it strike you that you are a little unreasonable? There are men here on the boat who have long known me as Fred Henning, and who have reason to believe that I am married and the owner of a good estate. As I understood the matter, it was your idea that I, being Fred Henning, had at one time passed myself off as Muggridge, and under that name had swindled you. Now if I, as Fred Henning, was married up in Concordia on the 6th of September last, I could not, as Muggridge, have been at that date on the Caddo Belle near New Orleans."

"This thing is a little too much for me just now," grumbled the planter. "I must get a bit stronger before I can work through it. You argue like a lawyer, young man, and my head is muddled. Supposing you to be the Fred Henning named in that paper, why are you carrying your marriage-certificate about with you?"

"For a very simple reason. I am going to attend to some land business for my wife and myself, and have thought proper to take with me, as documents that may be necessary in the transaction, my marriage-certificate and the will under which we inherited the property."

"Where is the land?"

"In Calcasien parish."

"In Calcasien? That is where I live. The muddle is getting worse."

"Perhaps, then," suggested Fred, "you may be able to tell me something about the land, as I am entirely unacquainted with it."

"Perhaps I may, if you can tell me where and what it is."

"It is a large plantation, lying between two forks of the Calcasien river, and known as the Grosse Tete tract."

Major Chappelle whistled.

"My wife and I own an undivided half-interest in the tract," continued Fred. "We do not know who the other owner is, and that is one of the points on which I want information. I am going to Calcasien, to look at the land, to find the other owner, and to make him an offer, either to buy our part of the tract, or to sell us his."

The planter whistled again.

"Perhaps you doubt my word in that matter," suggested Fred.

"I don't know about that. I am badly muddled just now, and allowance must be made for me. But I may say, if this is not another big sequence flush that you are putting up on me, that you have not far to go to find the person you speak of. I happen to be the unfortunate owner of an undivided half of the Grosse Tete tract."

"You?" exclaimed Fred, whose surprise could not have been otherwise than genuine.

"It is a fact, if it is possible to believe anything to be a fact. But I may say right now that I don't want to buy the other half at any price. I would be glad to sell, but could not conscientiously advise anybody to buy."

"Why so?" inquired Fred. "Is it such a poor property?"

"It is a splendid piece of land, rich and well watered, and in time will be very valuable. But there is what the lawyers call an adverse possession."

"Indeed! I had no cause to suppose that there was any cloud on the title."

"Not a shadow of a cloud, as far as the title goes. The adverse possession is clearly unlawful, but quite solid, for all that. Any lawyer will tell you that possession is nine points of the law, and in this case it seems to cover all the points."

"Squatters?" suggested Fred.

"Squatters, and worse than squatters. They are a bad and lawless set who have taken possession of that tract and hold it in defiance of the rightful owners. There is really little known about them; but they are generally supposed to be responsible for many depredations that have been committed in that region and over the Texas border."

"Has no attempt been made to drive them off?"

"None that is worth speaking of. They have taken advantage of the peculiar position of the tract. I have known nothing of the other owner or owners, and I would need their authority, if not their aid; before I could make a move. Besides, our parish, though a big one in acres, is a small one in population, and the law doesn't lack much of being powerless in such cases."

"Resolute men could change that," remarked Fred.

"Yes, and something ought to be done. But I have no business to tell you this. I ought to have hoodwinked you and sold you my share, in the chance of getting back a part of my twenty thousand dollars."

Flush Fred could not help showing that he was nettled at this.

"So you mean to stick to it that I am the man who swindled you," said he. "I must say, Major Chappelle, that you are very hard-headed. I suppose you are acquainted in New Orleans. Do you happen to know a Mr. John Kremby, formerly of Avoyelles, who is now in business there as a cotton factor?"

"Yes, indeed. He is my man of business in the city."

"He was present at my wedding in Concordia. We will call on him when we get to New Orleans, if you are willing, and he will tell you where I was on the 6th day of September last."

Thus the matter rested until the end of the trip of the Cyclone.

When the boat landed at New Orleans, Fred Henning accompanied the planter—the latter with his arm in a sling—to the office of John Kremby, who fully identified him as the Fred Henning named in the marriage-certificate, and as having been in Concordia parish on the last previous 6th of September.

On this showing Major Chappelle invited his late antagonist to visit him at his home and consult concerning the land in which they were jointly interested.

"But my head is still muddled," he said. "I would have been willing to swear to your face and your voice and everything about you. Now I can't work my way through the business at all. If you are Fred Henning, who was that man Muggridge?"

"That is what I want to know," answered Fred. "The question with me is, have I a double?"

CHAPTER IV.

FLUSH FRED'S BASENESS.

ROSE LAWN, the residence and plantation of Major Louis Chappelle, was a lovely place.

Situated on a branch of the Calcasien river, in a region that was well watered and diversified by forest and prairie, it had every charm except that of the civilization which springs up in the neighborhood of cities or large towns.

The surrounding country, indeed, was as yet so unsettled that it was more like Texas than Louisiana, and the neighborhood of Rose Lawn was so lacking in neighbors that it could hardly be called a neighborhood.

But the plantation was finely located, and contained within itself nearly everything that could be needed by people of reasonable desires.

The mansion was on rising ground, and was built in that charming Southern style which is so exactly suited to the climate and the surroundings.

It was only two stories in height, and square in shape, but large and roomy, with wide verandas on all its four sides, and with an abundance of windows, which were protected from the fierce rays of the sun by a variety of screens and shades.

The mansion was not expensively or elegantly furnished, but had a comfortable and homelike appearance that was delightful.

Many of the forest trees had been left standing, and afforded a grateful shade.

But most of the broad space that reached down from the front of the house to the road that ran along the river was given up to a magnificent lawn, covered with ornamental trees and flowering shrubs and plants.

Plenty of magnolias were there, with rhododendrons, azaleas, and vegetation peculiar to semi-tropical regions; but the glory of the lawn was its roses.

Louis Chappelle had named the place in honor of his wife, who had been Rose Bandoine, and she, determined that it should doubly deserve the name, had planted there such a wealth of roses that the lawn was fairly ablaze with them.

Roses of all varieties and hues.

Roses here and there and everywhere.

Such an abundance of roses that it was one of the occupations of the female residents of the plantation, black and white, to gather the leaves and distill them in the old Creole fashion.

On the broad front veranda, as the summer day was nearing its close, were seated Mrs. Chappelle and her daughter Florence.

It would be a sin to speak of the matron as an old lady—she looked so young and fresh and bright.

Those who sought to compliment her were won't to say that she looked scarcely a day older than her daughter, though Florence was known to be little over eighteen.

The girl was a blonde, as her mother was, and it would have been hard to find, in any parish or State or county, a finer specimen of young womanhood.

She had her mother's features, as well as her manner, and had the appearance of being just what her mother might have been at her age.

Both were clad in cool and airy dresses of lawns, and each had a bit of work in her hands, but rather as a pastime than as an occupation.

"Your father surely ought to be home soon, Flo," the older lady was saying.

"I do so hope he will hurry back, ma. It is really lonesome without him, even here. Frank is as good a son and brother as we could ask to have; but he has got to be such a man, or fancies that he has. He is away so often, with his hunting and fishing, and all that sort of thing, that he is scarcely any company for us. I want papa to come."

"So do I, my dear, and so does everybody on the place. You say that Frank is so much away; but I can tell you, Flo, that he has been managing the plantation admirably in his father's absence. But the master's eye is needed and everybody wants the master."

"What will you say to him, when he comes, about that—that man who was here the other day?"

"I shall tell him the truth, of course; and the whole truth. That is the only thing to do when it is proper to say anything, and this is a matter of which your father ought not to be ignorant."

"I would be ashamed to speak to him about it, ma."

"But I am not. The impudence of that man was amazing. I never heard of anything of the kind—would never have imagined anything of the kind."

"He was a handsome fellow, though."

"Handsome is that handsome does, as the old proverb tells us. I hope that he did not succeed in fascinating you, my child."

"No, indeed. His good looks were spoiled by his brazen manners."

"Only think of his assurance! An entire stranger, who had accepted our hospitality, he had hardly been two days in the house when he began to make violent love to you. It was the most outrageous thing I ever heard—almost enough to make one forswear the sacred duty of hospitality."

"I am glad that we said nothing to Frank about it, ma. He is so high-strung and impulsive, that he would have killed the stranger, or have been killed by him."

"Yes, my dear; the easiest way is generally the best way. But I must give your father an account of the entire affair."

A young man came quickly around the corner of the house, and approached the ladies on the veranda.

Quite a young man, scarcely out of his teens, but tall, athletic and well developed, with long black hair, dark eyes, a faint mustache, and the glow of health in his cheeks.

He was neatly dressed in a brown linen suit and a broad straw hat.

"Mother," he said, "His Royal Highness is coming. Haven't you heard the sound of wheels?"

"Nothing of the kind," answered Mrs. Chappelle. "You must be very sharp of hearing, Frank."

"I laid my ear to the ground, as we do when we are hunting, and heard wheels and hoofs on the river-road. As it is seldom that anybody comes that way, it must be father."

"I hope it is, my son."

"Listen! I hear it plainly enough now as I stand here. Can't you catch the sound?"

Yes, they both heard it, and in a few minutes a sort of carryall drawn by two horses came in sight.

"It is Dingley's team," said Frank, "and I suppose Joe Dingley is driving. But father has brought home somebody. I will run down and meet them."

He crossed the lawn, and reached the road as his father was descending from the carryall.

Then Major Chappelle came hurrying to the house, followed slowly by his son and another gentleman, Frank carrying the stranger's valise.

The ladies noticed that the major had his right arm in a sling, and they could hardly wait to kiss him before they began to question him about it.

"Oh, that's nothing," he cheerfully answered. "I hurt myself a bit. Will tell you all about it after awhile. Here comes a friend of mine, and I want you to make him feel at home."

"Any friend of yours will be welcome, Louis."

"Of course he will, and here he is. A fine-looking fellow, isn't he?"

Neither of the ladies responded.

They did not rise from their chairs, but each fixed a stony stare upon the stranger who had nearly reached the house.

"What's the matter?" wonderingly demanded the planter.

"That man!" exclaimed his wife, in tones of anger and disgust. "Is that man your friend, Major Chappelle?"

"Why, yes. I have not known him long; but I believe I may call him my friend. At least, he is my guest, and as such should be hospitably received."

"He has shamefully abused our hospitality

once, and during your absence. That is enough."

The stranger had stopped within a few paces of the veranda, and his face flushed as these highly derogatory remarks reached his ears.

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Major Chappelle. "You are surely mistaken, my dear. You do not even know my friend's name."

"Indeed we do. His name is Henning—Fred Henning, as he calls himself."

"By Jove! the muddle is getting thicker and tougher. This gentleman, Rose, has come here on business."

"Yes, I know—on business connected with the Grosse Tete plantation. That was what he told us when he was here before."

"Thunder and fury! I am all tangled up. Can you understand this, Mr. Henning?"

Flush Fred shook his head, but said nothing. He stood there mute and motionless; but his eyes flashed as his cheek grew pale.

Frank Chappelle had set down the stranger's valise, and was staring at him angrily but doubtfully.

The major had not taken a seat, but stood a little apart from his guest and the ladies, his countenance expressive of utter bewilderment.

"Suppose we try to get to the bottom of the business," said he. "This is not the first time that I have run against the same stump; but I have learned something by the collision. What is it, my dear, that you accuse this gentleman of having done in violation of the laws of hospitality?"

"I will tell you, plainly and fully," answered Mrs. Chappelle, "so that you may understand the enormity of his offense."

"He was an entire stranger in this country, he told us, and that fact and his gentlemanly appearance of course induced us to tender him the hospitality of Rose Lawn. He introduced himself as Fred Henning, and said that he was here for the purpose of looking after the Grosse Tete property, of which he was part owner. Frank was away and I offered him horses and everything he needed to go and visit the property; but he did not go near it."

"In fact, he never left the house; but, before he had been here two days, he found Florence alone, and began to make violent love to her in such an impudent and brazen manner that the poor girl was frightened out of her senses."

CHAPTER V.

"YES, I HAVE A DOUBLE."

MRS. CHAPPELLE'S clear and emphatic statement fell upon all like a thunderclap.

Florence blushed until her face was scarlet.

Fred Henning's cheeks turned red again, and he spoke for the first time.

"I did that?" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that such a charge is brought against me? Why, I am a married man."

"That makes the case vastly the worse," severely replied the lady.

Major Chappelle looked in astonishment from one to another, quite unable to comprehend the complication that faced him.

Frank Chappelle glanced angrily at the stranger, and then at his father.

"If you don't settle with this man, sir," he blurted out, "I will attend to him."

This recalled the major to the duties of his position.

"Be silent, my son!" he sternly ordered. "If I need advice or assistance from you, I will let you know. Until then, remember that I am here. As I said before, we must get to the bottom of this business if we can. Now, my dear, please tell me when Mr. Fred Henning was here and insulted the family by that outrageous conduct?"

"Three days ago," promptly replied Mrs. Chappelle.

A smile rippled over the major's face, and spread into a broad grin.

He stepped lightly to Flush Fred and held out his sound hand.

"It's all right, my boy," said he. "I think that you and I understand each other now. I must confess that when we came here I still had a lingering doubt that connected you with that man Muggridge; but it is all gone now, and I am glad to give you my hand and call you my friend."

"What do you mean, major?" indignantly cried Mrs. Chappelle. "Have you turned against your family? Do you want to disgrace us?"

"Not at my time of life," he answered, with a quizzical smile. "My dear, this is the man who gave me my lame arm—the man who shot me."

"Heavens above us! The man who abused my hospitality, who insulted our daughter, who shot you—and you give him your hand and call him your friend! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Not a bit of it. My wits are as sound as a dollar now. Take another look at my friend, Rose. His name is Fred Henning, and he is part owner of the Grosse Tete tract, and has come here on business connected with that property. Are you sure that he is the same man who was here three days ago?"

"Sure? Of course I am sure! He is not dressed now as he was then; but I could not forget him."

"You are simply mistaken, my dear."

"Mistaken? Do you mean to insult your wife and daughter? Surely you have gone crazy. I am not mistaken."

"Mark now, as our friend Shakespeare says, how plain a tale shall put you down. Three days ago, my dear wife, this gentleman, who is well known to me to be Mr. Fred Henning, was with me on board of the good steamer Cyclone, bound down the Mississippi river, and since then I have scarcely lost sight of him for a moment."

Talk of thunderclaps!

The major's direct and positive statement was a volcano and an earthquake to his family.

His wife stared wildly, and fairly gasped for breath.

"My husband," she said, slowly and solemnly, "can it be the exact truth that you have told me?"

"It can't be anything else, my wife. Did you ever know me to tell you an untruth?"

"Never—before."

"And I am too old to begin. What I have told you is the exact truth. Three days ago my friend Henning was with me, considerably more than a hundred miles from this house, and consequently he was not here to insult Florence and abuse your hospitality. Speaking of hospitality, we are neglecting its duties and pleasures. Frank, tell them to bring out here some ice, and sugar, and mint, and—and all that sort of thing, you know; some chairs, too. And send somebody to bring my things up and attend to Joe Dingley. Be quick now! My dear wife, I can't tell you the story and straighten out this tangle until I wet my whistle."

Frank Chappelle obeyed these orders with remarkable celerity, being anxious to get back and listen to the story.

The planter invited his friend to take a seat on the veranda, and seated himself in a comfortable arm chair, while he proceeded to compound what Milton styles "the cordial julep"—though it may be doubted if Milton was ever introduced to the genuine article.

The ladies were as yet far from being out of the woods of suspicion.

They were surprised and dumfounded, but still aggrieved and hostile.

When Flush Fred passed near them, they drew aside their skirts, as if to escape the contamination of his touch.

They did not look at him, much less speak to him.

That they did not know what to make of the situation was a small part of the matter—the worst of it was that they actually doubted whether their husband and father was in league with a villain, and had become the enemy of his own family.

When the major had "wet his whistle," in which pleasing operation he was joined by his new friend, he started to tell his story.

"My dear wife," said he, "when you say that what I have told you is incredible, I don't blame you in the least. It is quite natural that you should say so, and is just what I expected. But I am going to explain the impossible and prove the incredible."

He "made a clean breast" of the whole business, beginning with his meeting with Flush Fred in the Social Hall of the Cyclone, and leading up to the duel on the shore, which he described accurately.

"It seems, then," said Mrs. Chappelle, "that your antagonist had your life at his mercy, and that he refused to take advantage of his position. That, at least, was the act of a gentleman."

"Exactly so. I recognize it as such, and appreciate it. But I was crazy just then. Disabled as I was, I wanted to continue the fight. If it had gone on, he would have been obliged to kill me. But I must finish my story."

The planter gave a full account of his subsequent interview with Fred Henning, and the explanations which that gentleman made to him, and which he found so difficult to believe.

He finished with the visit to John Kremby in New Orleans, and the identification of Flush Fred as the man who was married in Concordia parish on the 6th of the last previous September.

"So you perceive, my dear wife," he said in conclusion, "that the incredible may be the actual, and the impossible may be the real fact. I was quite as strongly set in my opinion, at the time of my fight, as you now are in yours; but the truth had not been shot into me then. I was not entirely convinced until you told me of the man who was here three days ago. That settled it, as Mr. Henning could not have been on the Cyclone with me and in this house with you. I hope, my dear, that you are satisfied now."

"I am satisfied," replied Mrs. Chappelle, "because I must be. I hope that your friend will appreciate my position and make allowance for my uncertainty. My ears are satisfied, but my eyes are not. I still see before me the man of whom I have been complaining. But there is

one who can settle my doubts, if they can be settled. Frank, ask old Jonah to step around here."

Jonah was the oldest negro on the place—a white-haired patriarch, who was respected and loved by white and black for his intelligence and many good qualities.

He came slouching around the house with Frank, and doffed his hat, as was his custom in the presence of his master's family.

Mrs. Chappelle took him in hand, and questioned him without interruption.

"Jonah, did you ever see this gentleman before?" she asked, pointing at Fred Henning.

"Deed I did, Miss Rose. Seed him hyer t'odder day."

"Are you sure?"

"Dunno w'y I shouldn't be shuah. Looks jess like de man."

"Suppose, Jonah, that I should tell you that this gentleman is not the one that you saw here the other day, would you believe me?"

"Allus b'lieb w'ot you say, Miss Rose."

"Suppose Major Chappelle should tell you that this gentleman, at the time you think you saw him here, was more than a hundred miles away, on the Mississippi river. Would you believe him?"

"Boun' ter b'lieb Mars'r Tom: but 'twould be a wrastle."

"I wish you would look closely at this gentleman, Jonah. Did you look closely at the other one?"

"Allus looks cluss at strangers, Miss Rose."

"Look closely at this one, then, and tell me if he is the same you saw here the other day."

The old negro carefully and deliberately adjusted a pair of spectacles to his eyes, stepped close to Fred Henning, and peered into his face as intently as an entomologist would examine a new bug.

The strictest silence prevailed.

Flush Fred endured the inspection with a smile.

Then Jonah took off his spectacles, and solemnly delivered his judgment:

"Tain't de same gen'leman, Miss Rose."

"The countenances of his auditors lighted up, as if a Daniel had come to judgment."

"How do you know that?" asked Mrs. Chappelle. "What difference do you find between this one and the other one?"

"Fu'st place, in de eyes. Dat one's eyes was waverin' an' onsart'in like. Dis one's eyes is stiddy an' straightforrerd. Dat's somefin, but sca'cely solid. T'odder one had free white ha's on de lef' side ob his mustachers. Dis one 'hain't got nuffin' ob de kine. But dey's pow'ful like, Miss Rose. Ef de angel Gab'r'el should blow his ho'n an' call bofe ob dem to judgment, he couldn't tell t'odder frum which. But ole Jonah's got 'em down fine."

"Thank you, Jonah. That will do."

The old negro slouched away, to give his worshipers in the "quarters" fresh food for wonder.

Mrs. Chappelle rose and gave Flush Fred her hand.

"I ask your pardon, Mr. Henning," she said, "and am glad to know you. The resemblance is so wonderfully exact that you will hold me excusable."

"You are entitled to my gratitude, rather than blame," replied Fred. "I am heartily glad that the question is settled, though it is uncomfortable to feel that I can only be sure that I am myself by the lack of three white hairs in my mustache."

"Mustaches can be dyed," suggested the planter.

"But not so as to produce three white hairs," replied his wife.

"It seems hardly fair, my dear Rose, that you should accept old Jonah's testimony, after disbelieving mine."

"I did not disbelieve, though I doubted. Such a resemblance was so incredible that I needed cumulative proof, and I got it. But you said, major, that you wanted to get to the bottom of the business, and you are not there yet. If this Mr. Henning was with you on the Cyclone three days ago, who is the Mr. Henning who was here the other day?"

"An impostor, of course. I suppose he is the same scoundrel who once called himself Muggridge, and robbed me of twenty thousand dollars. I only wish I could get hold of him."

"It is evident to me," remarked Fred, "that the scamp has discovered his resemblance to me, and is trading on it. There is no telling how far he may carry the game, or in what complications I may become involved. I will write at once to my wife, telling her all that has happened, and warning her against my double."

"I am convinced now that you have a double," said Major Chappelle.

"Yes, I have a double."

CHAPTER VI.

A VILLAIN—OR DEAD.

GRAVELLY BAYOU, the residence and plantation of Fred Henning, though not so freshly charming a place as Rose Lawn, was in some respects more attractive.

Its greater age gave it a more settled and complete appearance, and it possessed the advantage of nearness to towns and means of communication.

Mrs. Fred Henning, formerly Kate Helmsley, a young and handsome woman, with an infant child, found herself lonely in the big mansion after the departure of her husband.

It was the first time since their marriage that he had been away from her more than a day at a time, and she missed him sorely.

Some of her friends and relatives, the Brenners, had come over to help while the time away; but it passed very slowly.

Even her baby boy could not console her in the absence of Fred.

In her opinion, the business that took him away from her might better have been left unattended to.

They had enough of this world's goods, and any possible gain he could make would not repay her for the loss of his presence.

Feeling solitary and restless, in spite of the company in the house, she got into her carriage with the child and his nurse, and was driven to visit some old friends, General and Mrs. Brayham, who lived a few miles from Gravelly Bayou.

She found them at home, as nearly everybody in that neighborhood usually was, and was warmly welcomed by them.

The baby was kissed and petted and praised, and the mother was complimented and congratulated to her heart's content.

"But why did not your husband come with you, my dear?" inquired the old lady. "We were rather looking for him."

"My husband!" exclaimed Kate, with surprise that was surely genuine. "I thought you knew that he had gone away. He must be now somewhere in the southwestern part of the State."

"But he has returned, you know."

"Returned? Fred returned? I have not seen him."

"Not seen him, Kate?"

"Indeed I have not, and it is impossible that he should have returned and not have come home."

"Not impossible, my dear, though I admit that it is highly improbable. But he has surely returned. He was here yesterday."

Kate's face turned deathly pale, and she clasped her baby to her breast, as if she would shield him from a great calamity that was impending, if it had not already overtaken her.

"Are you in your right mind, Mrs. Brayham?" she demanded; "or have I lost my senses? Surely you could not be so cruel as to joke with me about such a serious matter."

"Of course I would not. You are as dear to me as if you were my own child, and I would not for the world do or say anything to hurt or annoy you. I am terribly distressed about this matter, and don't know what to make of it. But it is certain that your husband was here yesterday. Both of us saw him and spoke to him, and the general transacted a little business with him."

Kate looked appealingly toward General Brayham.

"Tell me all about it," she entreated. "Give me the exact truth and the whole truth."

"You need never expect anything else from me, my child," replied the old gentleman. "I suppose that we are quite as much surprised by what we have heard from you as you have been by what my wife told you."

"The simple truth is that Fred Henning was here yesterday. It was late in the afternoon when he rode up to the house, and he came in, though he declared that he had not a minute to stay."

"We expressed surprise at seeing him back so soon, and he said that he had had a little trouble on the way. Then he asked for a private interview with me, which of course he had, though it seemed a little unnatural in my friend Fred, who never had any secrets from the old lady here."

"It quite hurt my feelings," interjected that same old lady.

"He told me," continued General Brayham, "that he had lost some money on the boat going down the river, and that he was owing something to a man who had come ashore with him at Martigny, and who was in a hurry to get away. He wanted to borrow a thousand dollars to pay that man."

"And you lent him the money?" asked the bewildered wife.

"Of course I did. If he had wanted ten times the amount, and the money had been in the house, Fred Henning should have had it. Not because he was the owner of Gravelly Bayou, but because I knew the man, you see."

"And I thought that I knew him," murmured Kate.

"There is little more to tell, my dear Mrs. Henning. After I gave him the money he would not stay for a bite or a sup, but left us a little unceremoniously, saying that he must hurry back to Martigny, and from there go home. But he promised to come over and look us up to-day. Now you may judge what a surprise you have given us."

Kate would have fallen from her chair if Mrs. Brayham had not come to her support, and the general hastened to administer to her a restorative that smelt suspiciously of brandy.

It revived her, and, like the brave woman that she was, she resolved to look all the facts fairly in the face, and to learn the worst or the best of the calamity that seemed to have befallen her.

"It is only because you have told me this, my dear friends, that I believe it," she said. "But for that, it would be absolutely incredible. I believed that I knew Fred Henning, and I married him for the good qualities I saw in him, ignoring his past. Was his past worse than I had supposed it to be? and has he proved to be a man whom I must dread and despise?"

"No! no!" cried the old gentleman. "I know Fred Henning too well, and have seen too many of his good points, to believe or even suspect that there is really anything wrong about this business. There must have been some mistake, or some sudden trouble."

"But if he needed money," insisted Kate, "why should he not have come home to get it? He would have found plenty there, and it is all his."

"My dear child, you must remember that my house is much nearer to Martigny than his, and that he was in a hurry to get back and pay the money to the man he spoke of."

"Why, then, did he not come home after he had paid the man?"

"I don't know, indeed. There may have been some complication that he had not counted upon. Or there may have been something that he did not care to disclose to you. Young men will get into trouble, and the best of husbands sometimes have little secrets from their wives."

"Not my husband!" emphatically declared Kate. "If he is what I have believed him to be, he would have come home and told me his trouble. If he is not, what has life left for me now?"

She fell into a passion of tears and moans, and good Mrs. Brayham could not comfort her.

The general was obliged to apply to himself the same restorative that he had prescribed for her.

"Don't take it that way, my dear!" he begged. "There is something that we cannot yet understand. It will all be explained in time. Don't take it that way!"

"But I must take it that way!" declared the afflicted wife, as she brushed away her tears and resolutely rose to her feet.

"There is no other way to take it. Either my husband has lied most shamefully, or—"

"Or what? What terrible thought is in your mind now?"

"If he is not a villain, he is dead, and I would rather know that he is dead than believe him capable of such falsehood and double dealing. I must know the truth, General Brayham, and must know it as soon as possible. I cannot long endure this torture."

"Yes, my child; but be calm."

"I am calm—calm in the determination to learn the truth."

"Yes, my dear. Yes, indeed. But what can we do?"

"He told you that he had come from Martigny, and that he was going to return to that place. I must go at once to Martigny and make inquiries concerning him. Can you send somebody with me, old friend?"

"I can send myself, my poor child," replied General Brayham. "You must let me go with you."

CHAPTER VII.

"IT IS ALL RIGHT!"

MRS. BRAYHAM fully approved of Kate Henning's proposition.

In fact, it would have been useless to oppose it, as the afflicted wife had determined upon it, and she was known to be set in her ways.

Her carriage and horses were brought out, and she was driven away with General Brayham and the nurse and baby, as she would not bear of leaving the little one to await her return.

At Martigny she got such poor consolation as was, perhaps, worse than none. The tavern-keeper at the little landing assured her that Fred Henning had been there the day previous.

Of that there was no doubt at all. He had landed from an upward-bound boat—one of the Natchez packets—in the company of a man who seemed to be very familiar with him, but whom the tavern-keeper did not know.

The two men had taken dinner there, and Mr. Henning had hired a horse to ride home, leaving his companion at the tavern.

In the evening he had returned, and the two had supper.

Then they got horses and rode away, promising to be back in the morning.

Nothing more had been seen of them; but the horses had been brought back by a strange negro boy, who had nothing to say about the riders.

The boy had brought no message concerning the bill they owed there; but that was all right, as the tavern-keeper had charged it to Mr. Henning, whom he well knew to be responsible.

Kate settled that part of the business by calling for the bill and paying it.

"Whatever he may have done," she said to her old friend, "or whatever may have become of him, no debts shall stand against him."

Then she cross-questioned the tavern-keeper with an adroitness and persistency that would have done credit to a sharp lawyer.

"What sort of a man in appearance was the person who landed with Mr. Henning?" was one of her points.

"Not what you might call a nice man," answered the landlord. "Had the look of a hard case."

"You say that he seemed to be very familiar with my husband. Did you hear any of their conversation?"

"Notkin' to speak of. What passed in my hearin' was mostly about eatin' an' drinkin'."

"Did you notice anything peculiar in Mr. Henning—about his dress or otherwise?"

"I did notice that he wasn't dressed as he was when he started down the river—more rough and careless like."

"Any peculiarity in his actions?"

"Only a little. I never saw him drink before as he did then. He was allus mighty moderate that way. I noticed, too, that when I axed him some questions about home folks and that sort o' thing, he had precious little to say, and shut me up kinder sharp, which he didn't use to do."

"When he came back from his ride alone, did he have anything to say about his home or family?"

"Not a word. He seemed to be jolly about somethin'; but he and t'other man talked it over private like, and then they got their supper and hurried off."

"Where do you think they went to with the horses?"

"No tellin', ma'am. They might ha' gone up to Vidaly, or down the river, or 'cross the kentry, or anywhar else. I didn't ax the nigger, and he didn't let on. I reckoned that Mr. Henning had gone home."

Kate requested the landlord to make all possible efforts to ascertain what had become of her husband, or who was the negro boy who brought back the horses, assuring him that he would be well paid for his trouble.

"What seems to be the matter?" he asked, when he found himself alone with General Brayham.

"It's hard to tell," answered the old gentleman. "We want to know what has become of Fred Henning. He has not been home, and his wife is afraid that he has met with foul play."

From Martigny Kate Henning and her old friend drove home.

There she sent a messenger with a letter to a lawyer in Vidalia, detailing the circumstances of her husband's return and disappearance, and directing inquiries to be made.

Other messengers were sent to Mrs. Brenner's and neighboring plantations.

Nothing more could then be done, and General Brayham was driven away, that he might reach home before night.

Kate passed a sleepless night, and in the morning was badly broken down.

The next day the Brayhams visited her, but brought no news, nor had she any for them.

Other inquiries and searches were started; but no results came from those that had already been made.

The poor wife passed a wretched day and another wretched night, and in the morning anxiously awaited the arrival of her mail.

It was possible that he might have sent her an explanation by letter.

Before noon General Brayham was surprised at seeing her drive up to his door rapidly, her horses smoking and foaming.

But she was not wretched then. She was radiant.

The baby had been left at home, and that was a fact of vast importance.

Of course she had news, and great news; but what was it?

She did not keep them in suspense, but ran briskly into the house, holding a letter in her hand, kissed and hugged them both, and dropped into a chair, sobbing and laughing by turns, after a most absurd and hysterical fashion.

"It is all right, my dear friends," she cried, as soon as she could find a voice to speak with.

"It is all right. I have heard from him."

"A letter?" inquired General Brayham.

"Yes, I got a letter from him this morning."

"He can't have gone far away, then, or you would not have heard from him so soon."

"That is where you are wrong. He is 'way down in the southwestern part of the State. This letter was written three days ago."

"Impossible. It is not three days since he was here and got that money."

"He was not here at all."

The old gentleman looked puzzled, if not offended; but he smiled pleasantly.

"Come, come, my dear child. Tell us something that is reasonable. You know that we both saw him."

"It was another man."

General Brayham shook his head, and sadly addressed his wife.

"Is it possible, Ellen, that our dear friend is about to lose her senses?"

"No fear of that now," brightly answered Kate. "I am as sound as a dollar to-day. What I have told you is nothing but the sober and solid truth."

"How, then, are we to explain your husband's appearance here and his presence elsewhere on the same day?"

"Fred has a double!"

The countenances of the old couple lighted up, but doubtfully.

They were rejoiced, but not satisfied.

"He has already been forced into a duel on account of his double," continued Kate, "and he has insulted a nice girl before he was found out. No—it was the other man who did that. But here is his letter. Read it, and you will understand the entire trouble. No—I will read it to you, as I know his handwriting so well. Listen, now, and wonder!"

They listened intently, and wondered extensively.

Their wonder almost amounted to incredulity. But there was no denying the date and the stamp and the other accessories that proved the genuineness of the letter.

It was clearly the statement of Fred Henning, and there could be no doubt that it was not he who had called on General Brayham and borrowed that money.

"You see," said Kate, "that he wrote to me as soon as he had found out that fellow, for the purpose of warning me against him. It seems that the only marked difference between them is found in three white hairs which the other has in his mustache. Fred was afraid that the scoundrel might deceive me. The idea! As if I would not know him from a hundred men who looked exactly like him!"

"But I was deceived," suggested the old gentleman.

"Yes, and that is the trouble. I should be with him to identify him. Perhaps he might even be arrested for some crime of that scamp's. My dear friend, I must go to him."

"And take the baby?"

"Of course I will take the baby, and you know that Zeke Tibbles, our overseer, can be trusted to manage the plantation."

"Well, my dear, I see no reason why you should not go, and I will go with you."

CHAPTER VIII.

KATE AND THE LYNCHERS.

THE details of Kate Henning's journey would be too tedious to recount.

If they should prove to be half as tiresome to the reader as they surely were to the travelers, there could be no excuse for furnishing them.

Kate's party, which included General Brayham and the baby and his nurse, traveled in her carriage, drawn by the best of the Gravelly Bayou horses.

Avoiding the circuitous route by way of New Orleans they went by boat to a convenient point on the river, and thence across the country in the carriage.

It was a long and tedious trip; but, as the roads were in good order at that time of the year, they made rapid progress, and approached their destination sooner than they had expected to.

Safely and in good condition they reached a little village within the limits of Calcasien parish as a hot summer day was ending, and necessarily decided that they would pass the night there.

The small and shabby inn was scant of comfortable accommodations, especially for travelers of their quality; but they were obliged to put up with what they could get, and to make the best of it.

After enduring an execrable supper, they sat out in front of the stuffy little tavern, away from the odors of garlic and salt fish, the baby shielded from the dampness, and sleeping on its nurse's lap.

Kate was enjoying the cool night air, and General Brayham was enjoying a cigar, and both were congratulating themselves upon having so nearly reached the end of their journey.

The general had finished his cigar, and they were about to seek such rest as the inn might afford them, when a confused murmur of sounds came down the road that led through the village.

The murmur rose to a hubbub, and the hubbub swelled into a hullabaloo.

As the noise drew nearer, shouts of exultation could plainly be heard, mingled with fierce yells.

A crowd was visible, coming down the road, and in advance of them hurried a few men, almost breathless, but eager to give away the news with which they were loaded.

The excitement had brought forth the landlord, who ran out to where his only guests were seated.

"What is it, Jules?" he demanded of the first comer.

"We have caught him, messire," answered the man, speaking in a Creole patois that could not be easily reproduced on paper.

"Who is it that you have caught?"

"The man who killed Bill Stump at the Caca-jou."

Jules hurried on to spread his news and keep ahead of his rivals.

The landlord hailed the next man and got a few further details.

"Where did you catch him?"

"Up near Hickory Flat. He had stolen a horse there so that he could run away to Texas, the murdering hound!"

"What are you going to do with him?"

"We mean to hang him on the big tree yonder."

And the second man hurried on, anxious to get a front seat at the show.

"Ah! now they will settle him!" exclaimed the landlord, rubbing his hands. "It was not enough that he should kill a man—he has dared to steal a horse."

"How did he kill the man?" inquired General Brayham.

"It was over there at the Caca-jou—that vile cabaret which pretends to be an inn, but has no rooms for guests, and sells nothing but sour wine and fiery spirits. Oh, it is a bad place, messire, a shame and a terror to good and peaceful people."

"No doubt of that, my good sir. But how was the murder committed?"

"They were gambling there—the stranger and some of the neighboring people. A quarrel arose over the cards, and Bill Stump was shot dead by the stranger, who escaped before the indignant citizens could lay hands on him. Oh, he is a terrible man, a fearful, murderous villain!"

"He is a stranger, then?"

"I am glad to say that he is. We have some bad people here, but none so bad as that. He is a gambler from the big river, they tell me, and those men are all very bad."

"What is his name?"

"Who knows? Men of that class have so many names that no person can keep the count of them."

The crowd had nearly reached the tavern, and were hurrying forward, their shouts and yells and oaths making the night hideous.

The population of that vicinity was decidedly mixed in its composition.

The village was quite Frenchy; but the outlying region, especially toward the north, largely consisted of grazing-land, and was sparsely settled by cattle-herders who would be called ranchmen further west.

Of these ranchmen the crowd was mainly composed, and they were rough and rowdyish in their appearance and behavior, though their everyday life was usually quiet and monotonous enough.

They numbered about two dozen men when they entered the village, and recruits were rapidly added to their ranks as they passed through.

In the midst of the throng was a tall and well-dressed young man, with dark hair and mustache.

His hat was off, and his face was pale, but set, as he was roughly dragged along and hustled about.

Already a halter was around his neck, and other ropes were carried by men in the crowd, to give point to their deadly purpose.

"You must excuse me, my friends," said the landlord. "I must go and see the finish of this business."

Kate Henning rose from her seat with a startling scream, and would have rushed into the throng if she had not been restrained by her old friend.

"What is the matter?" inquired the landlord.

"My husband!" she cried.

"Your husband! Where is your husband?"

General Brayham had also, greatly to his surprise, recognized the prisoner in the hands of the mob.

"The man they have there," he said, "is this lady's husband, Fred Henning?"

"Fred Henning? Yes, that is the name he gave, as they told me. Is it possible that she is his wife?"

"Let me go!" frantically entreated Kate. "Come with me. Fred is in danger; we must save him!"

The mob had stopped, attracted by the excitement in front of the tavern, and wondering what it meant.

The prisoner seemed to be as much bewildered as any of them, but was looking anxiously about, as if hoping that the interruption might show him some way of escape.

"Hold on!" shouted the landlord. "Wait a bit, my friends. Here is the man's wife. Let her see him before he dies."

The prisoner's face lighted up at the word wife, and he glanced quick at Kate, as she and General Brayham followed the landlord into the crowd.

"Oh, Fred!" she cried, when she had got as near to him as they would let her go, "what does this mean? What terrible trouble is this?"

"It is all a mistake," he answered, speaking hoarsely and gruffly. "They have taken me for another man."

Kate appealed to the mob, her hands outstretched, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Listen to me, gentlemen! I am sure that it is a mistake. My husband would never be guilty of a crime. You would do a great wrong if you should kill him. Give him a chance to clear himself from this charge."

Most of the crowd set up a howl of derision.

It was evident that they did not believe her statement more readily than that of their prisoner.

It was also evident that their respect for her sex and her personality speedily decreased when she announced herself as the wife of a red-handed criminal.

But she was a woman, young, beautiful, and apparently of good position, and as such entitled to decent treatment.

CHAPTER IX.

"WE WILL SOON KNOW."

A LARGE and portly man, of respectable appearance, and evidently a person of consideration in the neighborhood, stepped forward while the mob halted there, and spoke to the afflicted wife.

"Very sorry for you, ma'am; but we really can't afford to stop this procession. The man is guilty. There is not the least doubt of that."

"Hear me first!" entreated Kate. "He is not the man you think he is. My husband has a double."

"A double? A double? What on earth do you mean by that?"

"There is another man, who resembles my husband so closely that it is almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. My husband has already had trouble on that account, and now I find him in danger of death."

The pitying smile with which the large man had regarded her gave place to a sneer.

The pretext which she had invented was too absurd to be considered for a moment.

"It won't do, ma'am," said he. "It won't do at all. Is your husband in these parts?"

"I have come here to find him."

"Is the other man in these parts?"

"I believe so."

"This is the worst I ever heard. What is your husband's name?"

"Fred Henning."

"Just so. That is the name of the man we have here. It is the name he gave last night, and now he don't deny it."

"But the other man has called himself by my husband's name."

"Worse yet. We can't be bothered by such nonsense as that. Whoever this man may be—whether he is your husband or not—he is the man we want. He committed a cruel and cowardly murder here last night, and many of us know him to be the man who shot Bill Stump. To-day he was guilty of another crime."

"He killed my brother!" shouted one of the crowd.

"He stole my boss!" yelled another.

"Hang him! Hurry him on!" screamed the mob generally.

The prisoner was silent. His face was set and stolid, and the only expression in his restless eyes was that of a hunted man seeking a way of escape.

General Brayham stepped forward to speak for his friend.

"Hear me for a moment!" he begged. "This lady and her husband are people of property and highly respected citizens of Concordia parish. They are neighbors of mine, and I can vouch for the truth of what this lady has told you. Her husband has a double, who has stolen his name. The false Fred Henning appeared at my house one day last week, and borrowed money from me. Even I, who am intimately acquainted with this lady's husband, was deceived by the fellow. The real Fred Henning was at that time somewhere in this part of the State, and she has come in search of him. I believe, as she does, that there is a mistake here."

"Who may you be?" inquired the large man.

"I am General Martin Brayham, well known through Louisiana."

"We don't happen to have heard of you down this way. Hadn't you better claim to be the President of the United States? We have heard of him."

"I suppose you think that you can insult me with impunity," angrily replied the old gentleman.

"I suppose I could if I wanted to. You insult us all by trying to impose on us with such a ridiculous yarn. Let me tell you, Mr. General Martin Brayham, that the man we have here—double or no double—no matter who he is or where he comes from—is the scoundrel who murdered Bill Stump last night, and who stole a horse to-day. For that we mean to hang him."

"Hang him!" shouted the crowd. "Go on! Don't stop here to be fooled!"

The prisoner turned a reproachful glance upon Kate as the mob started, and again her pleading and piteous tones brought them to a halt.

"Wait! For God's sake, wait!" she entreated. "Why should you hurry a man to death

without giving him a chance? You, sir, who seem to have authority among these men, will you suffer such a wrong to be done? Is there no law here?"

"A little," grimly answered the large man.

"What there is of it is too far away and of too little account. There's not enough of it for such cases as this. Men of this fellow's stripe get clear or skip out."

"But there ought to be some sort of a trial—an inquiry at least. Keep him until morning, and give me a chance to prove that you have made a mistake. Put him in jail—chain him down, if you will."

"You could never do it, ma'am. There's plenty who know that he killed Bill Stump, and he was caught in the act of stealing the horse. Besides, it's nearly fifty miles to a jail."

"But there are men enough to guard him. I will pay all expenses. I only ask you to wait until he has a chance, and I have a chance, to prove him guiltless."

The landlord came to the relief of Kate, and pleaded her cause ably.

He was a man of influence in the neighborhood, and had been favorably impressed by his guests.

The carriage, the horses, the nurse and the baby, persuaded him that they must be somebody from somewhere.

The gist of his argument was that it was just possible that they had got hold of the wrong man, and that they need be in no hurry to hang him, as it would be easy enough to keep him until the next day.

He enforced his arguments by a private conversation with the leader of the mob, who talked with some of the other men, and the conclusion at which they finally arrived was that Kate's request should be granted, and the prisoner should be held until morning.

"We will take him over to the Caca-jou," said the large man. "Good guards are better than stout walls; but, to my notion, there's nothing so safe as a rope and a tree."

As the prisoner was led away, surrounded by the disappointed and sulky crowd, he cast backward a bright and thankful look at Kate, who stood in front of the tavern, with clasped hands and streaming eyes.

It was arranged that the wife should be allowed to see her husband when the excitement had quieted down, and that the strange statements of herself and her elderly companion should be inquired into.

Accordingly, after Kate had been given time to rest and recover herself, the landlord took her and General Brayham over to that "vile cabaret," which was then devoted solely to the business of holding and keeping the man who had so narrowly escaped lynching.

He was well guarded, by grim and determined men, who were evidently not pleased with the task, and not disposed to be accommodating, either to the prisoner or to his guests.

There were two men on the outside, the others, with the proprietor of the "shebang," occupying the one room on the ground floor of the building.

In the door was a small window, usually covered with a curtain, and through that opening the visitors were allowed to look.

The prisoner was kept at a safe distance from them, lest they might be tempted to steal him and carry him away in their pockets, and an oil lamp furnished the only light that made him visible.

"What can we do for you Fred?" tearfully asked Kate. "Surely we can straighten out this tangled affair. Shall I send to the people who know you, at Rose Lawn?"

"It is not worth while, my dear," he pleasantly answered. "It will be all right in the morning. I have gained time, and that is all I needed. I have been allowed to send for some friends of mine, and they will prove who I am, and I shall go clear."

"Are you sure of that?"

"No doubt of it at all. Go back to the tavern, and rest quietly, and you will see that all will be right in the morning."

"But I have so much to say to you, Fred. Such strange things have happened."

"They will not allow you to stand there and talk, and you need rest. So do I."

"Here is General Brayham. Won't you speak to him?"

"Of course I will. I thank him for speaking up for me. I heard you say, general, that some impostor had called on you last week. I had expected something of the sort."

"You have not said a word about the baby," complained Kate.

"Kiss the baby for me, and good-night!"

Kate sadly went away, dissatisfied with the interview, if not displeased.

It was unlike Fred to treat her so cavalierly on such an occasion, and his confident assertions did not carry conviction to her soul.

She communicated a little of her uneasiness to her old friend, and was surprised at the suggestion he made.

"Suppose, my dear child, after all, that this should be the other one."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Kate. "Do you fancy that I would not know my own husband?"

Fred wrote me, you remember, that the other one had three white hairs in his mustache; but this man has nothing of the kind."

"You saw him by a very poor light," remarked the general.

"But I looked closely, and my eyes are sharp. Besides, he told you that the man who borrowed that money from you was an impostor."

"Of course he did. The fact had already been mentioned to him."

"Please don't unsettle me any more, my dear friend. The morning will tell the story."

They did not have to wait for the morning to tell the story.

Before dawn the main episode was ended.

Kate was awakened from a troubled sleep by reports of firearms and a noise of shouting.

Fearing that the mob had reconsidered its action, and had determined to hang her husband to make his punishment sure, she dressed herself as soon as she could, and hurried downstairs.

There she found the landlord in earnest conversation with General Brayham.

The shooting and yelling had ceased.

Lively as the fracas was while it lasted, it was soon over, though the excitement in the street continued.

Within the tavern all was silent, and not a light was shown.

"What is the matter?" anxiously inquired the worried wife.

"Your husband has escaped," answered the landlord. "A gang of rough strangers rode into the village, frightened and drove away the guards at the Cacaou, and carried him off."

"Mercy on us! Was anybody hurt?"

"Nobody, as far as I have heard. But the people are going crazy over the escape, and they accuse you as the cause of it. Some of them have already been inquiring for you. That is why the house is closed and dark. You must leave here immediately."

"I will not run away. I will stay here and explain everything."

She was assured that no explanation could satisfy the heated and suspicious people, and that there would be no safety for her but in flight.

General Brayham strongly supported that opinion, and she was compelled to yield.

"All is arranged," said the landlord. "I have already sent your carriage to the edge of the woods, and I will guide you to the spot. But you must hurry."

They did hurry, and under the cover of the darkness they stole away to the edge of the woods, where the carriage was waiting for them.

Kate made a substantial present to the landlord, whose kindness to them threatened to get him into trouble.

He pointed out their direction, and they drove away rapidly.

"I do not understand this at all," said Kate, when they were at a considerable distance from the village.

"It seems to be plain that he has escaped," replied her old friend.

"I suppose so; but I hardly know whether I ought to be glad or sorry."

"Well, my dear child, let us consider the matter calmly. Your—that is, the prisoner of the mob told you that he had been allowed to send word to some friends. The men who came and rescued him were the friends he spoke of."

"Yes—but—"

"So it is clear that Fred Henning must be a scoundrel, and connected with a gang of scoundrels, or that the prisoner was not Fred Henning. For my part, I prefer to take the latter horn of the dilemma."

"Is it possible that even I have been deceived? If so, it is no wonder that others were swindled. It is all so strange that I do not yet know what to think of it."

"We will soon know."

CHAPTER X.

CHARLEY WYNNE'S WAYS.

CHARLEY WYNNE, as he was familiarly addressed by nearly everybody who was on speaking terms with him, had not been eminently successful as a planter, or a farmer, or a ranchman, or whatever he chose to style himself in connection with his various pursuits.

But he was well satisfied with himself and his efforts, and was convinced that all his failures were only stepping-stones on the road to success.

The eldest son of a wealthy banker in New Orleans, he had shown a strong desire to become a landed proprietor and a director of the efforts of the earth in the way of production.

So the paternal Wynne had given the youth a large piece of wild land in western Louisiana, which had come into his possession through a bad debt, and Charley had seriously set himself at work to develop the capabilities of the tract.

He took with him a few slaves, who ruled and petted "Mars'r Charley" to their heart's content, and erected a small but neat and comfortable house on his estate, with the necessary negro quarters and outbuildings.

Having studied—in books—the subject of sheep, he considered himself capable of running a sheep farm, and stocked his place with wool-bearers.

But his land was not suited to the production of that variety of wealth, being too low and wet, if not too far South.

When the last of his sheep had died, he pronounced the experiment a dead failure, and went into cattle, with incidental attempts at horse-raising as what Colonel Sellers would style "a side issue."

In this occupation he was engaged without any brilliant results so far, when we find him riding southward over his broad acres in search of a stray mare and her colt.

A handsome and manly young fellow was Charley Wynne, with hair as light and eyes as blue as a Norwegian could boast, and with a fair, fresh complexion that was more suggestive of Vermont than of Louisiana.

It must be admitted that he was quite eccentric in some of his ways.

For instance, he had named his place "Wynne-or-lose," and by that name it was known to those who knew it at all.

In his dress, too, he was particular to the verge of dandyism.

As he rode forth in search of the stray mare, he was attired with scrupulous neatness in a suit of his own invention, which was elegant as well as fanciful.

His broad Panama hat, of the finest quality that could be bought, served the purpose of protecting his valued complexion.

Yet, in spite of his eccentricities, Charley Wynne was highly respected by the sparse population of the vicinity.

His "niggers" could testify that, though he was never seen without gloves and a clean shirt, he was never known to shirk the hardest and rudest labor when it was necessary.

Others knew that he was always ready to go to any length to help a friend or a neighbor, and that he appeared to have no idea of the nature of fear.

Frank Chappelle, who was regarded as a young dare-devil, was wont to say that if he wanted a leader to take him straight into the infernal regions, he would choose Charley Wynne.

He did not find his mare.

When he looked southward, and saw two persons riding toward him, he abandoned the search, and did not think of it again.

The two persons were a man and a woman—to speak more accurately, a youth and a maiden.

Whatever Charley Wynne's failures might have been in that region, he had achieved success in one pursuit.

He had accomplished the capture of Florence Chappelle.

To speak more accurately again, she had captured him without an effort, and thus he had been driven to exert himself to make the matter even by capturing her, and this he justly regarded as the great success of his life.

A satisfactory understanding was arrived at all around, and their attitude toward each other was then that of engaged lovers.

Thus it was natural and quite proper that he should hasten to meet Florence and her brother when he saw them riding in his direction.

They were rejoiced to meet him, and had news for him.

"Look at this picture, Charley," said the girl, as she handed him a photograph. "Do you recognize it?"

"Of course I do," he answered, with a frown. "It is the fellow who was at your house a while ago—the scoundrel who insulted you—the wretch whom I am to shoot on sight."

"Yes, but you must not shoot this one."

"Not shoot this one? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that this is not the man you saw at our place. This is another man, and he is there now, and is our good friend."

"Holy Croesus! What sort of an idea is twisting about under that pretty head of hair? In the language of the vulgar, what are you giving me?"

"Why, Charley, it is the queerest thing, and you must know— Oh, pshaw! Suppose you try to tell him about it, Frank. I am all tangled up."

Frank Chappelle tried, and succeeded very well in telling the story of Fred Henning's arrival at Rose Lawn and the subsequent developments.

He told it so plainly and directly that Charley only had to cross-examine him a little to clearly understand the trouble.

The young proprietor took it very philosophically, but sighed and shook his head.

"Wonders will never cease," said he. "As you have told me this marvelous yarn, Frank, and your sister vouches for it, I am bound to believe it, and I do believe it. But I shall not attempt to spread the news, for fear of getting my hands full of fights. I only hope Florence dear, that no stranger who is my exact image will turn up to claim you and take you from me."

"Oh, Charley! Do you suppose—"

"That the world could hold two such handsome fellows? I do not. There is a limit to all marvels. Being a paragon, I am safe."

"I did not mean that, you conceited cattle-fend. I meant to ask you if you suppose that I could be mistaken."

"Under the circumstances, I do not. I can defy any other idiot to imitate my style. But I have a fearful problem to solve. Here I am, sworn to shoot a scoundrel on sight, and a gentleman transpires, who is the exact image of the scoundrel. When I get ready to shoot, how shall I distinguish between the scoundrel and the gentleman? Or shall I shoot so as to hit him if he is the scoundrel, and miss him if he is the gentleman?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Charley," replied Florence. "It is easy enough to tell them apart. Old Jonah settled that for us. The false Fred Henning has three white hairs on the left side of his mustache."

"That is as easy as climbing a rainbow. Shall I invite myself to a personal inspection of his mustache before I bathe in his gore, or shall I examine him carefully after I have laid him out. After all, my dear friends, perhaps I had better leave the scoundrel to be shot by the gentleman who seems to have a prior claim on the privilege of perforating him."

"That would have too much the look of a man shooting himself," suggested Frank.

"Well, there is no law in Louisiana against suicide. I believe, Frank, that if your sister is to be kept clear of those complications, she had better make up her mind to an early move to Wynne-or-lose, and help me raise camels."

"Camels?" ejaculated Florence. "Who ever heard of raising camels?"

"Many people raise them, my dear, and they are very useful animals. They can go without water as long as a Texan. If my land won't grow anything else, it ought to grow camels. My cattle are becoming disgusted with the world, or this part of it, and I will have to fall back on something. Perhaps we had better try giraffes, Flo. They are very handsome, and are said to be good ones to go—though I doubt if anything could go faster than my sheep did."

"Drop your nonsense now," said Frank. "and attend to business. Father wants you to come down to Rose Lawn, and go with him and Mr. Henning to look at the Grosse Tete tract."

"With pleasure. Anything to get in good company. But you must ride to the place with me, and pick up a little lunch, while I lay in some ammunition. I understand that the Grosse Tete tract is afflicted with the big head, as we say of mules, and is not entirely a safe place for stray travelers."

CHAPTER XI.

AN INCREDULOUS ALLY.

FRED HENNING took in meditative action, upon the second discovery of his double, to prevent the occurrence of further unpleasant or dangerous complications.

As has been shown, he wrote to his wife, to warn her against the rascal who had usurped his name.

He also wrote to a number of his acquaintances, especially to those with whom he had business dealings, or who might be approached by an unscrupulous swindler, to guard them against being deceived by any man who should attempt to personate him.

Having thus covered all the points he could think of, he was at liberty to consider the situation, and to decide what measures he ought to take for his own safety and the punishment of the man who bore such a dangerous resemblance to him.

As that individual had recently appeared at Rose Lawn, and had represented himself there as a part owner of the Grosse Tete tract, it was reasonable to suppose that he had designs upon that property.

Its distance from Fred's residence, and its neglected condition, would give him an advantage in playing such a game.

The probability was that he was connected with the gang of depredating squatters who had settled on the tract, and that he would remain in the vicinity.

Fred Henning expressed a desire to visit the Grosse Tete land and inspect it.

Major Chappelle assured him that they could gain nothing at that time by a personal examination of the property, as they could see only a great stretch of wild land, watered by small streams, and composed of heavy timber mostly, with scattered spots of prairie.

As Fred still insisted, the planter sent for Charley Wynne, as a valuable addition to the party.

He admitted that the locality was not considered an agreeable one for casual visitors, as their inspection might be interfered with by the lawless persons who were supposed to be in possession of the tract.

Therefore it would be advisable to go in force and prepared for defense.

But, before the expedition was ready to start, circumstances caused it to be abandoned, or at least postponed.

Both the joint-proprietors went down to Lake Charles, where they had business.

The chief object of their visit was to get legal advice, and to put in motion such machinery of the law as might be needed to secure to them the possession of their property.

With this view they called on Judge Arnoux—so styled because he had been a judge—who was Major Chappelle's legal adviser, and stated the case to him.

The man of law hummed and hawed, and appeared to consider the matter a troublesome one, in its practical working, if not in its legal aspect.

"As you suggest," said he, "there is an adverse possession, such as it is, and its existence is not to be sneezed at. The truth is, gentlemen, that the Grosse Tete tract has got to be a nuisance to the parish, and there are many who would be glad to see it abated—not the tract, but the nuisance that is maintained there."

"If that is the case, they ought to be willing to take a hand in abating it," remarked the planter.

"Some of them might, and some might not. They naturally consider it the duty of the owners of the land to clear it of the pests. But there will be plenty, I suppose, to take hold when they are convinced that you mean business, and we have only to settle on the best plan of procedure. The first thing necessary, in my opinion, will be an ejectment suit."

"It is rather hard," said Flush Fred, "if we must go to the expense of a lawsuit to get possession of property that is undoubtedly ours."

"Well, my dear sir, we don't know what sort of a claim those people may set up. They seem to have been in undisturbed possession for several years. But that is not the real point. What you want is to have the law behind you, so that you may be sure you are right, in the words of Davy Crockett, and then go ahead. Trespass would lie against the squatters, no doubt, if you could name them and find them. But an ejectment suit is the surest and best remedy, as the papers can be served by posting and advertising. Of course they will not defend it, and we will soon get a writ of dispossession against them. Then you will be justified in raising a posse to enforce the writ."

The lawyer's view seemed to be a sensible and practical one, and he was instructed to go ahead as rapidly as possible.

"As for making a visit to the tract for the purpose of examining it," said he, "I would not advise you to do anything of the kind. The rascals would have the advantage of you there, and might think the chance a good one to clear their title by wiping out the owners."

"But I want to see it and know all about it," insisted Fred.

"That is a big thing to say, my young friend, as there is so much of it. The easiest and best way would be to get a description of the tract from somebody who already knows it. I can find such a man for you."

"Who is he?" inquired the planter.

"Hark Sanders is his name, and he is a hunter and cattle-ranger."

"I have heard of him. I suppose he would know as much about the land as anybody."

"Perhaps as much as the squatters themselves. He is not in town to-day; but I will send him up to Rose Lawn as soon as I can get hold of him. You had better defer your expedition until you have had a talk with him."

With this understanding the gentlemen returned to the Chappelle plantation to await an interview with Hark Sanders.

He did not come as soon as they expected him, but finally, when the two proprietors of Grosse Tete were seated on the veranda, a man rode up whom they both pronounced to be Hark Sanders.

He was a tall man, long of body and of legs, mounted on a high and gaunt sorrel horse, which he rode with a broad-horned Texas saddle, his legs well down, and his bridle-band low, while a splendid repeating rifle rested over his saddle-bow.

All his wealth must have been invested in that rifle, as it was clear that no unnecessary sum had been expended on his clothing, which was rough, not to say ragged.

His face, naturally dark and bronzed and weather-worn, was partly shaded by a wide palm-leaf hat and his black hair straggled down on his shoulders, looking as if its acquaintance with a comb had been as remote as its intimacy with a pair of shears.

A man of middle age, who probably looked a few years older than he really was.

A man of iron, whose impassive features were rendered more impenetrable by a heavy beard.

Impassive as he was, he started and halted his horse when he came in full view of Fred Henning.

"What kind of a go is this!" he muttered.

Then he dismounted, tethered the gaunt sorrel, and walked to the veranda, where he was welcomed by Major Chappelle.

The usual refreshments were brought out, and the customary remarks concerning the weather were exchanged.

Hark Sanders spoke but briefly, and kept his eyes fastened on Fred Henning.

He was invited to refresh himself, and he filled a glass with whisky, opened his mouth, and dropped the contents down his gullet without so much as winking.

Then he resumed his seat, and fixed his eyes on Fred Henning again.

"I suppose, Mr. Sanders," said the planter, "that Judge Arnoux has told you what I wanted to see you for."

"Yes, major; he told me."

"And I suppose you can give us the information we want."

"I reckon I ken, ef you want any."

"If we want any? Of course we want it."

"That sounds kinder queer to me, major, bein's you've got a man here who knows more about Grosse Tete than I do, and that's sayin' consid'able."

"What do you mean, Mr. Sanders? What man?"

"That man—settin' thar."

He leaned forward as he spoke, staring so pointedly at Fred Henning that there could be no doubt of his meaning.

His tone and manner, too, were decidedly disrespectful toward the gentleman from Concordia.

The planter stared at the bronzed hunter, and frowned severely.

"I don't understand you," he said. "This gentleman is my friend, Mr. Fred Henning."

"Stranger, too, hey?" inquired Sanders.

"Yes—he has been here but a few days."

"Jess so. Not so much of a stranger, though, as he lets on to be. Leastways, not to me. Fred Hennin', to be sure, is one of his names, though I've heard 'em speak of him as Muggridge, Muggridge, an' what not."

The planter was then intensely excited.

"Muggridge!" he exclaimed. "Are you sure that you have heard that name?"

"Sure as I set here, and it's the name of a scoundrel who oughter been hung long ago. But I would never ha' looked to find him in this house. Ef that's the sort you go with, major, you don't want nothin' o' Hark Sanders. Git yer infumation from yer pard thar."

"But, Hark, listen to me."

"Reckon I know when I've got enough, and I'm goin' now. I've spoke my mind to you, and I mean to settle with the man who sent me here on a fool's errand."

He was about to walk away, when the planter detained him.

"Hold on, Mr. Sanders! You have had your say, and now I have something to say to you. Judge Arnoux has sent you here on no fool's errand, and you are just the man we need—the man we both need."

"I ain't the man fur any sort o' crooked business, and you oughter know that, Major Chappelle."

"There is no crooked business here. Am I the man for that? I don't blame you for the error into which you have fallen; but there is a great mistake."

"Mistake! Where in thunder's the mistake?"

"Sit down, and I will explain it to you, if it takes a day and a night."

Flush Fred had not as yet said a word, leaving his friend to settle the difficulty with their expected ally.

The planter stumbled through his explanation as well as he could.

"This gentleman, Hark Sanders, is not the man you suppose him to be."

"Come now, major; draw it mild."

"Mr. Henning has a double."

Sanders whistled.

"I am speaking the truth. Listen to me, and I will tell you a strange story."

The planter gave a brief but sufficiently full account of his meeting with Flush Fred, their adventures on the Mississippi, and the subsequent developments at Rose Lawn.

"So you see," he concluded, "that while Mr. Henning was with me on the Cyclone, his double was here at my house, lying to my family."

The rough hunter shook his head, and did not hesitate to express his incredulity.

"I'd hate to say that I don't believe you, major," he observed; "but that is sech a tough varn that I don't seem to be able to swaller it. You say that thar's a big mistake. Mebbe it's you that made it."

CHAPTER XII.

KATE AT ROSE LAWN.

HARK SANDERS had not finished the expression of his incredulity, when a carriage drawn by two fine horses were driven up to the house.

In it were four persons besides the negro driver—an elderly gentleman, a young and handsome woman, a colored nurse and a baby.

Flush Fred jumped to his feet with a cry of joy and surprise.

"Here is my wife!" he exclaimed.

He ran to the carriage, received her in his arms, kissed the baby, and grasped the hand of General Brayham.

The new-comers were made acquainted with Major Chappelle, and were seated on the veranda.

"Reckon I'd better go now, major," remarked Hark Sanders.

"No, my friend; you must not go yet, I have much to say to you. I will call my wife and daughter to receive Mrs. Henning."

"Have the kindness to wait a moment," he treated that lady. "I must relieve my mind before it explodes. I did not mean to allow Fred to kiss the baby until I had got an explanation from him."

"What do you want to know, my dear?" inquired her husband.

"I want to know how you escaped."

"Escaped? When? and from what?"

"From the place where you were confined and guarded last night—from the mob that wanted to hang you."

Flush Fred was so startled and shocked that he could only stare in amazement.

But he quickly recovered his composure.

"You are too much for me now, Kate," said he. "When and where did that extraordinary event occur?"

"Last night, as I told you. At a little village about a day's drive from here—I do not know the name of it."

"There we have it again," said the planter with a laugh. "Your double has been getting you into another scrape, Fred. Why, Mrs. Henning, your husband was here last night, and nowhere else. I can prove it by myself, my wife and daughter, my son and Charley Wynne, the servants—everybody in the house. I will bring them out."

But they were already coming out.

Mrs. Chappelle and Florence, attracted by the unusual spectacle of a carriage and a beautiful young woman and a baby, could not wait for formalities, but pressed forward to get a better view of the strangers.

They were overjoyed at discovering the wife of their guest, and the baby was naturally petted and praised.

"I must beg you to settle down and be as quiet as you can, my dears," said the planter. "Mrs. Henning thought it proper to have a personal explanation with her husband before you appeared, and we were about to hear a very exciting story. I will give you the beginning of it, and I am anxious to get to the finish."

He related what had passed on the veranda, and the ladies were intensely interested.

Frank Chappelle and his friend, who had joined the group, were also excited.

"Now we are coming down to solid facts," I hope," remarked Charley Wynne.

"I am very anxious to get to the finish," said Flush Fred. "Please go on, Kate, and tell us the whole story. But what was it that sent you down here in the first place? Did you get my letter?"

"I did, and I have come to look after you. But I may as well begin at the beginning, as I will have to come to it sooner or later. Before your letter arrived, the trouble had begun. The other man suddenly appeared in Concordia."

"Is it possible? Already? Did he have the impudence to go to you?"

"No; but he went to our old friend, General Brayham, and borrowed a considerable sum of money from him in your name."

"The rascal! I can't wonder at anything that may happen after that. I want to know how he played his game."

General Brayham took up the story, and related his interview with the false Fred Henning and the subsequent events up to his departure with Kate.

"Of course your letter settled that difficulty," resumed the young wife, "and I was angry with you for supposing that I needed such a caution, as if I could possibly mistake any other person for my own husband. But it has been terribly proved to me that even I could be deceived. Hear my confession, and then you can judge how great may be the dangers into which that scoundrel may bring you."

She proceeded to give a full account of the exciting events of the previous night.

"It was not until morning," she concluded, "and when we were running away from there as fast as we could, that the truth dawned upon me, and I must confess that General Brayham had a suspicion of it sooner than I had. The man was your exact image, Fred, and was so plausible, and yet, when I come to reflect upon it, what he said and did was so unlike you."

"If you had only known," suggested Florence, "that the other man has three white hairs in his mustache. Old Jonah discovered that point for us."

"I did know it," replied Kate, "and I scouted the idea, when I saw it in Fred's letter, that I would need such a means of identification. I inspected the man carefully, and could see nothing of the kind."

"It was dark, my child, and you did not get a very close view," remarked General Brayham.

"That is true; but I believe that I would have seen those white hairs if they had been there. Even now I am inclined to demand posi-

tive proof that this Fred Henning is really my husband.

"So am I," said Fred. "I am sometimes bothered by a serious doubt whether I am myself. You say that the trouble occurred last night, Kate. It seems to me that I am sure that I was here all the night. Is it possible that I may have slipped out of the house, unknown to myself or to any of the other inmates?"

"I can testify that it was not until after ten o'clock that you went to bed," replied the planter, "and you and I had our morning bitters together before eight. I think that settles it."

"It ought to, unless I had the wings of the wind."

"Then again, my young friend, you had shot a man over a game of cards the night before, and you were surely here that night. The next day you stole a horse and were captured; but there is no doubt in the world that I was with you all that day, and that we both went to Lake Charles. Oh, Mrs. Henning, it is beyond the remotest range of possibilities that the Fred Henning whose neck you saved last night was the same Fred Henning you see here to-day."

"I am fully satisfied of that," replied Kate.

"And so am I," said Hark Sanders, rising and coming forward.

"Give me your hand, major; and you, too, Mr. Hennin'. I'm powerful sorry that I pitched into you as rough as I did; but the sharpest man in the world would be liable to be picked up as I was."

"That's a fact, my friend," answered the planter. "I was quite as badly mistaken as you were, and had to apologize to Mr. Henning, after the truth had been shot into me. My wife and daughter were in the same boat, baring the bullet."

"Well, sir, 'twas a powerful heavy dose fur me to swaller, and I'd never ha' got it down my throat if it hadn't been forced down."

"You see, then, Mr. Sanders, that you are the very man we want to tell us about the other Fred Henning—you, who know both of them."

Flush Fred, who had seemed to be greatly relieved when it was conclusively proved that he was himself, was now troubled and cast down.

"What a pity it is," said he, "that my wife met that rascal last night, when they were about to hang him!"

"Why so?" inquired the planter. "What harm has been done?"

"Innocently, and with the best intentions, she has done a great deal of harm. It would have been bad enough for that fellow to get himself hanged in my name; but it is worse to know that the job was not finished."

"There's something in that, Fred."

"There's very much in that. He was just going to meet the death he deserved, and within half an hour at most his career would have been ended. But my unlucky wife interfered, saved his neck, and gave him a chance to escape, which he speedily improved. If she had not happened to be there at that time, the rascal would have been put out of our way, and we would all have known that it was not I who was hanged."

"It was very unfortunate," remarked Kate, "but it can't be helped now. As Fred says, I meant well."

Charley Wynne suggested that it was more than ever necessary to catch the false Fred Henning and hang him, if it would be possible to do so without hanging the true one.

"It must be done," said the planter, "and our friend Sanders is just the man to help us do it. You must stay to supper, Hark, and I would be glad to have you pass the night here, if you will. We shall need your services, and you will be well paid."

Sanders declared his willingness to stay and tell all he knew about Grosse Tete and the man Musgrove or Muggridge.

"That infernal Muggridge!" exclaimed Major Chappelle. "If I ever get hold of him, he will rue the day he swindled me."

CHAPTER XIII.

"HE MUST BE EXTIRPATED."

As a matter of course, Mrs. Chappelle and Florence fell in love with Kate Henning and the baby, both of whom were immediately made at home and justly considered a great acquisition to the circle at Rose Lawn.

In the evening, while the ladies of the house were entertaining the young wife and mother, the men sat outside on the veranda, enjoying their cigars, but not idling the time away.

Frank Chappelle and Charley Wynne had joined the major and Fred Henning, and the four were listening intently to what Hark Sanders had to tell them concerning Grosse Tete and its squatters.

"I suppose, major," said the hunter, "that you've got what I mought call a ginerall idee of the track."

"Scarcely that, friend Hark. I have seen hardly more than an edge of it, and have never been over it or even across it. I know as little about it as any stranger."

"Wal, it's a big track, an' 'twould be summat

of a job to figger it all up. It's got a lot o' bad lowland, with its full sheer o' swamp, some good upland, and a heap o' rich timber-land. Mebbe you know that the squatters hev been cuttin' timber thar an' sellin' it."

"That has been going on for some time, I believe."

"Jesso, I reckon thar'd ha' been more of it ef the market had been better. Squatters has been thar, more or less, an' off an' on, ever sence I ken remember; but the gang that's runnin' it now has come up within five or six year, an' I reckon it warn't long ago that this man Musgrove begun to play the part of boss thar."

"'Twas some time last winter that I fu'st lit onto him."

"I'd heerd fur quite a while complaints about a gang in thar that was runnin' off cattle an' hosses from one place an' another, and folks had got to sayin' that it wasn't safe to go on the track."

"But I never minded that. Ef I wanted a deer or a b'ar outen thar, I went in an' got it, onregardin' o' gangs."

"One day I follered a big b'ar in thar an' shot him, and was down on the ground skinnin' him, when I heerd a shot, and a bullet whizzed nigh enough to make my head whirl."

"I looked up quick as a wink, an' saw a rough crowd of five or six fellers, who yelled to me to throw up my hands."

"I mought ha' showed fight; but the gun I had then wasn't this sweet'ner—on'y a muzzle-loader that shot once—and they war too many fur me."

"I thought o' the stories I'd heerd about men bein' wiped out in thar, and allowed that my time had come; but they couldn't git nothin' outen sech a poor coot as me, and what'd they want to kill me fur?"

"So I jist riz up an' walked forrerd to meet 'em, mighty glad to find sech a nice lot o' men thar in the woods."

"Anyhow, that's what I told 'em."

"I dunno what they mought ha' done; but it happened that among 'em was a man I knew—Matt Burns by name—whose life I'd once saved when a b'ar tackled him, and he told 'em that they had no call to worry Hark Sanders."

"Then that Fred Hennin' spoke up—not this 'un, I reckon, but t'other 'un."

"He said that he'd heerd o' me, an' was glad to see me, and that I was jist the man he was wantin' to find. Ef I would stay with 'em thar, on the Grosse Tete, I mought hev plenty o' money and an easy time. It would be a heap better, he said, than huntin' fur sca'ce game an' livin' from hand to mouth."

"I let on as ef I war mighty tickled by the offer, knowin' jist what he meant, you see; but all the time I was thinkin' o' the best way o' gettin' outen the scrape."

"So they tuck me up to the old place—mebbe you know, major, that a man from Orleans built a good sorter house over thar a many year ago, and allowed to raise cattle on the track, but got bu'sted up."

"Wal, the old house is badly tumbled down; but they war well fixed thar, and I ate an' drank with 'em, and had quite a jolly time."

"At last I told 'em that I was suited, and all I wanted was to git a better gun an' a few tricks I had to hum, an' would come over the next day an' jine 'em."

"So they let me go, and I left my b'ar with 'em, and sence that day I hain't set foot on the track."

"I don't count myself a coward, but reckon I know when it's best to keep away from a place."

"I've met Matt Burns, though, three or four times, and I told him a cock-and-bull story about bein' afeard that my old woman would blow on the hull lay-out ef I got too thick with 'em, and he gave me a few pints about that man Musgrove, or Muggridge, who now calls hisself Fred Hennin'."

"That's all I know about 'em, major; but I hain't furgot the ins an' outs o' the Grosse Tete track, and I'm ready to go in thar at any time with any party that's big enough and has got the law on its side."

"That is just what we want, friend Sanders," replied the planter, "and we will soon have the law on our side and know just how to go to work. Mr. Henning and I will go to Lake Charles to-morrow and hurry up things."

They did go to Lake Charles, but discovered that an unexpected delay had occurred in the legal arrangements.

Judge Arnoux appeared to be greatly surprised at seeing them there.

"What brought you back so soon?" he asked. "I supposed that both of you—or Mr. Henning, at least—would be far from here by this time. Have you reconsidered the matter again?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Major Chappelle. "I don't understand you."

"I mean, since you are such a very changeable pair, that I want to know whether you have again altered your minds since the notice you gave me yesterday."

"What notice? We were not here yesterday."

"One of you was, at least. Mr. Henning was, and I supposed that he spoke for both of

you. I hope that there is no disagreement between you two."

Major Chappelle burst into a laugh.

"Mr. Henning was at my house all day yesterday," said he.

Flush Fred also smiled, but rather grimly.

The lawyer frowned, and looked decidedly displeased.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he demanded. "It is not well to attempt to trifle with me, Major Chappelle. Mr. Henning was here yesterday and had a talk with me. It was brief, but all to the point. He told me that you and he had reconsidered your determination with regard to the Grosse Tete property, and that you would not bring an action ineffectment. He further informed me that you were both going away, and would be absent for some weeks."

The planter was sober enough then.

"I ask your pardon for laughing, Judge Arnoux," said he; "but you will surely forgive me when you know as much as we do, as you shall shortly. Henning, we will have to tell the judge about the other one."

"Of course we will," responded Fred. "If we had been as thoughtful as we should have been, we would have told him sooner."

They told him, but had hard work to convince him.

Indeed, they were obliged to go over the whole ground, and to give him the entire details of the affairs with which Fred Henning and his double had thus far been connected.

"You don't need to take my word for all this, judge," said the planter. "Come up to Rose Lawn, and see my folks and Mrs. Henning, and then have a talk with Hark Sanders, and I am sure that you will find evidence enough to satisfy you."

"I am satisfied without that, my friend. But this is a serious business. The man you speak of will not be likely to come near me again. Indeed, I don't see why he should have come here to deceive me yesterday, as he had very little to gain by it, if anything, and was sure to be found out."

"Perhaps," suggested Fred, "he played that game just to see if it would work, or in a mere spirit of bravado. I would like to know how he found out that we had authorized you to begin the action."

"Oh, that is simple enough," replied Judge Arnoux. "My proceedings, which were begun immediately, were public property, and doubtless he had some friend here who gave him information of what was going on. I would give something to know who that friend is. But this is a serious business, as I said. As he deceives one after another, and is found out, his game must be shut off so far; but there is no telling when or where he will break out in a fresh place."

"I have warned a number of people with whom I have a business acquaintance," remarked Fred, "and I am still doing all I can think of to guard against him."

"That is very well, young gentleman, but it is not enough."

"I know it is not. He must be captured and brought to justice, or settled with in some way."

"That is it. There is really only one measure of safety for you. He must be extirpated."

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE GROSSE TETE TRACT.

IN the heart of the heaviest timber of the Grosse Tete tract, and near the creek that formed its western boundary, was a dilapidated house.

It was situated in a clearing that was mostly overgrown by young trees and brush, and had been erected by the proprietor from whom it had passed, through various hands, to Louis Chappelle and Fred Henning.

Originally it had been a stout log-house, but subsequent additions had changed its appearance.

The builder had large ideas of utilizing the timber of the tract, and had erected a saw-mill for the purpose.

The first lumber that he produced was used for the purpose of building additions to his house, and for covering the logs so as to give it the look of a frame dwelling.

But he had hardly got his enterprise well under way when misfortune overtook him, and he abandoned the tract and the country.

Since then nobody had lived in the house he built—nobody, at least, who had a legal right to occupy it.

Consequently the frame additions had rotted and tumbled down, and the weatherboarding had extensively dropped from the logs to which it was tacked, and "the old place," as Hark Sanders called it, had a forlorn and desolate appearance.

The interior, however, at a period not many months subsequent to the hunter's visit, had by no means so forlorn and desolate an air as an inspection of the exterior would have suggested.

Each of the two large rooms that composed the ground floor—the only floor the house had, unless the lofts under the roof may be counted

—was comfortably furnished, and a few of the articles doubtless had in their time adorned much finer residences.

The building was what was known as a double log-house—twin structures, with a wide-covered passage between them.

One of the interiors was a sleeping apartment, and the other was used as a kitchen and sitting room.

In the last named division, about an hour after noon, were seated four men, smoking and lounging after a hearty dinner, the remains of which were still on the oaken table in the middle of the room.

Their names—at least the names by which they were known to each other—were Simon Casterfield, Matt Burns, Herman Steenbrook, and Leon Mascada.

Their ages ranged between thirty and forty, that of the eldest not being over the latter figure, and they represented various degrees of intelligence and civilization, the highest grade of the four belonging to Casterfield, and the lowest to Mascada, who was a Texas Mexican.

All were heavily bearded but Casterfield, who was cleanly shaved, and his attire was that of a moderately well-to-do planter, while the others might have been mistaken for cattle-raisers or drovers.

But there was no sign of a plantation within sight of the premises, nor were any cattle visible anywhere about.

"I want to see the capt'in come back," Matt Burns was saying. "He will bring us some news, I reckon, if nothin' more."

"Yes, we are always liable to get something exciting from that quarter," answered Casterfield. "He is a queer chap, is Joe Musgrove, though I admit that he is a smart one. The trouble with him is that he is so uncertain. You can never know where to find him, or what he is going to do next."

"The best man we could git hold of for our business, though, Simon. Keen as a brier, and up to all sorts o' tricks. What a splendid hand he is with a pen! and what close connections he has made with the parish officers! Nobody could beat him at fixin' up papers for the niggers we run off and sell, and that's the business that pays, old man."

"You're right there, Matt. Joe has a big head for that kind of licherachure. I only wish he'd stick to the niggers. I don't believe in havin' too many irons in the fire."

"But it'll be a big thing if he makes us solid on this track, and it's like enough he'll do it."

"Yes, the chances are all right, if he don't kick 'em loose. The difficulty with Joe is that his heart is apt to run away with his head."

"Wot d'yer mean by his heart?" grunted Steenbrook.

"That's what I call it. You may give it any name you want to. Women are too much for Joe Musgrove. If he ever has his neck stretched, or gets bu'sted up in any way, some woman will be at the bottom of the business. He is crank-sided that way, I am sorry to say. It was a good idee of his'n, when he had found out that he was the exact image of the man who is part owner of this track, to go over to Major Chappelle's and pass himself off as that man."

"Big thing," remarked Matt Burns. "What was it that you called it t'other day, Simon?"

"I said it was a stroke of genius, and so it would have been if he had stuck to the straight game and played his hand for all it was worth, instead of trying to deal from the bottom and grabbing for what he couldn't get."

"Wot was the matter with Joe then?" growled Steenbrook.

"A woman, of course. You know what a gentleman he is in his ways, and how he can slide into the good graces of tiptop people just as if he'd been raised among 'em. Well, he had got himself settled at Rose Lawn, and was at home there, all right, waiting for the old man to get back, when what does the durned fool do but go and tumble, all at once, heels over head, in love with the major's daughter."

"But there was a p'int to make in that," suggested Burns.

"Might have been, if he had had patience enough to play for it, and had stuck to the gentleman dodge. But the top of his head flew off at the sight of the girl, and he went plum crazy. Then he had to go and be too dodrotted sudden, roughing in as if the young lady was no better than a nigger wench. Of course she climbed onto her high hoss, and that broke up Joe's game."

"How d'yer know all that, Simon?" queried Steenbrook.

"He told me part of it, and the rest I guessed at. I know just how he will behave when a pretty girl puts the shimmer over his eyes."

"But the capt'in will straighten that up," remarked Burns.

"Maybe he will, and maybe he won't. He's smart enough; but, as I said before, there's no telling what he will do. Hello! Somebody coming, boys."

"Capt'in Joe, I reckon," said Steenbrook.

"Or Steve Lowry. More likely it's Steve."

The hoof-beats of a galloping horse could be plainly heard by those within the house.

Rapidly the sounds came nearer, and in a few minutes they ceased in front of the building.

"It's Steve!" exclaimed Casterfield.

The door was thrown open, and the four hurried out and greeted a tall man who was evidently one of their own stripe.

"No time to talk, boys," said Steve Lowry, in answer to the questions that were showered upon him. "Business on hand."

"What sort of business?" demanded Casterfield.

"Drove o' cattle and a durned fool."

All laughed.

"He must be as green as a gourd," observed Burns, "to ventur' on this track with a drove o' cattle. How fur off, Steve?"

"Not fur by this time. No time to talk, as I told yer. Come on."

The four men seized their rifles, and hastily followed the lead of Steve Lowry, shutting the door behind them, but without locking it.

No locks or bolts were needed there.

As Lowry had said, the "drove o' cattle and a durned fool" were not far distant.

Across the Grosse Tete tract, from east to west, there led a trail that had once been a road.

It had been a road, too, that had been considerably traveled, as it afforded the nearest access to a ford at low water and a ferry at high water across the Sabine.

But it had of late years become an accepted and notorious fact that the road was no longer a safe one.

In fact, it was regarded as actually dangerous.

Droves of cattle and teams that had started to pass over that route between Louisiana and Texas had mysteriously disappeared, and stray travelers, never reaching their destination, were not again heard of.

Thus it had come to be believed—if it were not really a proven fact—that there was a gang of marauders on the tract with whom the authorities of the parish were unable or unwilling to cope.

This belief had grown and become settled, until the road was virtually abandoned, which suited the marauders very well.

While it cut off one source of their revenue, it made the road a private one for them, and enabled them more secretly and conveniently to transact other business in which they were interested.

Therefore the road had been covered by grass and other growth, until it was no longer a road, but a trail.

Yet the trail was visible enough and easy to follow, and on it Steve Lowry, riding in that direction, had discovered his "drove o' cattle and a durned fool."

He had no need to invite them, as the spider invited the fly, to walk into the parlor of the marauders.

They were already headed in that direction, and he had but to let them alone.

The drove was composed of eighteen bullocks, neither fat nor lean, but in fair condition, and requiring only a little time and expense to make them fit for market.

The "durned fool," as Steve Lowry had designated the individual in charge of the drove, was a youngish man of a rather low order of humanity, bronzed and bearded as to his face, and decidedly rough and dirty in his general appearance.

He was armed with a quirt, or long black-snake whip, which he cracked at the drove, or slashed about their ears or sides, evidently striving to push them to a greater rate of speed than suited their convenience.

At the same time he cast glances backward over the trail that he had followed—frequent and apprehensive glances—as if expecting somebody to approach from that direction.

When the herd halted at any of the numerous watercourses along the route, showing a disposition to linger as well as to slake their thirst, he had been impatient and uneasy, using his best efforts to hurry them out and away as soon as possible.

At such times, too, he had dismounted and laid his ear to the ground, listening in that way for distant sounds.

The only conclusion to be drawn from these symptoms was that he had stolen the cattle, and feared pursuit.

If such was the case, he was taking them by the old road across the Grosse Tete tract because of its loneliness and bad reputation, dreading the dangers that might press behind him more than those that lay ahead.

He doubtless preferred to run the risk of being interfered with by other thieves, rather than that of being apprehended by the lawful owners of the cattle.

It remained to be seen how this scheme would work.

The interruption came, perhaps, pretty much as he might have expected it to come.

When the cattle had got into the thick of the timber, and had reached a green glade that tempted them to rest, they naturally wanted to stop and make the most of the opportunity.

The driver was about to ride forward and

urge them on, when he was startled by a sudden and peremptory command.

"Halt, and throw up your hands!"

The order was enforced by the display of not one rifle only, but at least three, and it had to be obeyed.

CHAPTER XV.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

THE cattle-drover knew instinctively, if not from previous information, what sort of company he had got into, and what would be the safest course for him to adopt.

He jerked back his tired steed, and quickly raised his hands as high above his head as he could get them, spreading out all his fingers, as if to make plain the fact that no weapon was there.

"Git down!" was the next order, and he promptly dismounted, without making any effort to hold his horse, which, by the way, showed no disposition to leave the spot.

He found himself confronted by five armed men, who looked at him sternly, but a little inquisitively.

The cattle, pleased by the interruption, began quietly to graze on the wild grass of the glade, and the horse followed their example.

One of the five men, detaching himself from the rest, walked about among the cattle, examining them.

"Who are you? and where have you come from?" demanded the leader of the five.

"My name is Jesse Sloper, and I come from Texas," meekly replied the drover.

"Where are you going with those cattle?"

"Takin' 'em East to sell 'em."

"How did you come by them?"

"I—I bought 'em."

"Oh, yes, you bought them. Just at the time of year when folks ain't eager to sell too. We understand that. Hope you got them cheap."

The man who had been examining the cattle stepped forward.

"Jest as I thought, Simon," said he.

"All right, Steve. Now, Mr. Jesse Sloper, I will tell you where you got those cattle, to save you the trouble of inventing any lies. Then I will tell you how you got them."

The drover's face looked ghastly through its bronze and dirt.

"You got those cattle in Texas, Jesse Sloper, as you say. You brought them across the Sabine at about the mouth of Big-Cow Creek. You got them from a man named Martin in Newton county. You struck into this trail with them because you thought you might not be followed. We know all this, because the cattle are ours."

"Those cattle yours?" replied the astonished drover.

"Not a bit of doubt of that, my friend. Every one of them have our mark, a slit in the left ear. We took them over into Texas some six weeks ago, and left them with Martin to fatten for us. So, you see, we know that you stole the stock."

The drover shivered, but did his best to put a bold face on the affair.

"You've got me thar, stranger," said he. "I did steal the critturs; but I wouldn't never ha' took 'em ef I'd knowed they was yourn."

"I don't see how that helps the matter," replied Simon Casterfield. "I suppose you know, Jesse Sloper, what the law does with men who take other people's stock. It locks 'em up, out of the way of temptation. Outside of the law the thing is managed a little better, I think. When the people over here catch a cattle-thief, they either hang him or shoot him. Shooting is the easiest, but hanging is the most agreeable to some folks. Which would you prefer, Jesse Sloper?"

The miserable man sunk upon his knees on the grass.

"Let me go, gentlemen!" he pleaded. "Don't kill me! I've got a wife and child'en."

"Oh, well, we don't want to worry them. They didn't steal the cattle. You are the only one who has to go over the dam. Suppose we leave it to my partners here. What do you say, gentlemen? Shall we hang this sucker, or shoot him?"

"We bain't got a bit of rope," answered Steve Lowry, "and it's too much trouble to go and get one."

"That settles it in favor of shooting. Tie him up, boys, and we will toss for the first shot."

In spite of his struggles and pleadings and imprecations, Jesse Sloper's hands were tied with his own quirt, and he was made fast to a tree with his own bridle.

"Before you go to join the angels, my young friend," said Simon Casterfield, "I will tell you something that may console you a bit. Those cattle are ours, because we stole them and sold them to that man Martin. They are still ours, because we intended to go over and steal them back when they were fat enough to suit us. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand," promptly answered Sloper, who must have begun to perceive that they were playing with him, after the manner of a cat with a mouse.

He spoke up as if a glimmer of hope had entered the space reserved for his soul.

"But I brought 'em to you, Cap," he eagerly urged. "They're in good order now, and I saved you the trouble of goin' arter 'em. Jest listen to me, gen'lemen, an' let me tell you the squar' truth. When I took the critters, I struck into this trail beca'se I'd heerd o' you folks, an' beca'se I allowed that I'd rather run across you-uns than be cotched by the Texas folks, bein's we're sorter in the same line o' business. Now you've got me, gen'lemen, hadn't you better keep me? I reckon it 'ud be wu'th while, as I'm an able hand at pickin' up cattle an' sech."

"There is something in what the cuss says," remarked Casterfield. "What do you say, boys?"

"It's my opeenyun," answered Lowry, "that a sucker who could run off eighteen head o' cattle from that man Martin is wu'th pickin' up. I reckon we'd better take him in."

"I'm agreeable," said Matt Burns, "ef he will j'ine us solid."

Steenbrook grunted an approval, and Leon Mascada's consent was taken for granted.

"That settles it," said Casterfield. "We will let you live, Jesse Sloper, if you would prefer to join this band of saints below, rather than go to join the angels up above, and I really doubt if you are the kind of man that the angels would cotton to."

"I'll be mighty glad to git into such good company," briskly replied Sloper.

"But there are two points, my young friend, which I must solemnly impress upon your memory. In the first place, Mr. Jesse Sloper, if you should try to act up to your name and slope away from us, it would astonish your weak mind to know how quickly a bullet would cut short your career. In the second place, you mustn't expect to begin at the top, and take rank with us old heads, but must be content with such work as is given to you, and obey orders without a word or a whimper. Understand?"

Jesse Sloper intimated that he did understand, and that he would be only too glad to stay and to obey.

"That settles it, then. Cast him loose, boys, and give him a drink. To-night we will wash him up and initiate him."

Hardly had the new member been released, when Steve Lowry raised his hand with a warning gesture.

"Somebody comin'," said he.

As Steve was noted for the extreme acuteness of his hearing, his statement instantly commanded silence.

He bent down to the ground, and laid his ear to the earth.

"Two men on hosses," he remarked, as he arose.

"That's them!" exclaimed Sloper. "I've been lookin' fur 'em to ketch up, all along."

"Who's them?" fiercely demanded Casterfield.

"Martin's folks, arter the steers."

"They have been following the trail, I suppose, as you made it plain enough. Like enough they didn't expect to follow it so far, and soon they will wish they had never struck it."

"Goin' to wipe 'em out, Simon?" inquired Matt Burns.

"Of course we are. Haven't we got orders from the Fool Killer? Cover, boys! and don't let a feather show! Steve and I will settle the cattle account with them. Take that tree over yonder, Steve, and I will take this one. If we give the boys a chance for a shot, they may kick us."

Even Jesse Sloper, rogue and vagabond as he was, was dumfounded by the coolness with which his new comrades plotted and proceeded to execute the murder of two men whose only offense was an effort to recover their own property.

He crawled under cover with the rest, and watched them as they handled their rifles, preparing for the work of assassination.

Simon Casterfield and Steve Lowry had stationed themselves, one on each side of the trail, behind trees that sufficiently concealed their persons.

In a few minutes the pursuers of the cattle-thief came in sight.

As Lowry had said, they were two mounted men.

One was of middle age, and the other quite a youth—doubtless father and son.

As they came in view of the cattle and Sloper's horse, that were still quietly feeding in the glade, the youth uttered a cry of joy.

"There they are!"

"Yes, I see them. Don't speak so loud, my boy. No telling who might be about, and we want to catch that durned thief."

On they came, and at least two unseen rifle-barrels were leveled at them as they advanced. In their case there was no order to halt and throw up their hands—no word of warning.

They were riding to certain death—to deliberate murder.

On they came, and Casterfield's rifle cracked.

With scarcely an interval that could be noted, Steve Lowry followed suit,

The two Texans fell backward in their saddles and dropped heavily to the ground, one of them hanging by his stirrup-leather.

The horses, frightened by the shots and the fall of their riders, started to run away, but were speedily caught by the marauders, who sprung out from their cover.

Steve Lowry had aimed at the old man, who had been instantly killed; but Casterfield's victim was still alive, though doubtless mortally wounded.

The murderer proceeded to finish his work and make it sure.

He stood over the body of the boy, and coolly blew out his brains with a pistol.

"Shall we bury them, Simon?" inquired Matt Burns.

"No. What's the use? Strip them, and the buzzards will do the dirty work for us. We will take these horses up to the house, boys, and some of us will have to watch the cattle until we can corral them or drive them off."

So the bodies of the unfortunate Texans were left there to the birds and beasts of prey, to be foully torn to shreds, or to shrivel and rot in the sun and rain.

Never would they return to their home from that trail of death.

Wife, mother, sister, brother—whoever might be waiting for them there—would vainly watch and wait for their return, until hope grew sick and died, and nothing was left but the certainty of some unknown disaster.

But there might be those who would score another dark item against the day of reckoning with the marauders of the Grosse Tete tract.

CHAPTER XVI.

JOE MUSGROVE'S LUCK.

THE mummeries with which Jesse Sloper was made a subordinate member of the Squatters' League of Six—raised by his arrival to seven—and the horrible oath that his new comrades exacted from him, need not be detailed here.

They were only saved from hideousness by their absurdity.

Perhaps it would be better to say that in their efforts to be hideous, the marauders overreached themselves and became ridiculous.

But their absurdity was not apparent to the dull senses of Jesse Sloper, who "took it all in."

He also took in an abundant supply of whisky, which flowed freely on the occasion, and was convinced that he had jumped into a clover-patch when he joined what Casterfield termed the band of saints below.

He was not so well pleased when he was sent out with Leon Mascada to watch the stolen cattle during the night.

Mascada had orders to shoot him down if he should attempt to escape, and there could be no doubt that the Mexican would willingly execute such an order.

It was yet early in the night, though the rest of the marauders were about to "turn in," when there was another arrival.

"That's Joe Musgrove," said Lowry, as he listened to the pacing of the horse outside.

"It's the capt'in!" cried Matt Burns, as he threw open the door.

In stepped the man who was the "living image" of Fred Henning.

Surely it was not to be wondered at that any person, however well acquainted with either of the men, should mistake one of them for the other.

Even if he should chance to see them together, it might puzzle him for a while to determine which was which.

Yet there were certain unmistakable shades of difference between them that would be clearly brought out by such contact.

It was only when they were seen separately and at different times that the resemblance would certainly deceive their close acquaintances.

In height, in build, in features, in eyes, in the color and even in the arrangement of the hair on his head and face, Joe Musgrove was the exact counterpart of Fred Henning.

In his manner, his air, and the indescribable something that is called style, there was a decided difference.

Flush Fred had gained a well-fed and substantial appearance, looking like a man of family and property, a settled and prosperous man; while the other gave the idea of an eager and restless fellow, who lives by his wits, and has no permanent abiding-place.

When Joe Musgrove appeared among his comrades, he was heartily welcomed, and was at once assailed by various inquiries.

"What's the news?" was the main purport of the questioning.

"What's the news here?—that's what I want to know," was his quick reply.

"Come, Joe; open out and tell us all you know," insisted Simon Casterfield. "You never come back without bringing something exciting, and we expect it."

"I did see something exciting, old man; but it was near this house that I struck it. As I was riding down the old road, my horse shied, and snorted, and was terribly frightened. I looked to see what was the matter, and noticed

something lying there that gave even me a shock. What's been going on here? Have you had a fight?"

"If it was a fight, the fighting was all on one side," answered Casterfield. "We wiped out two men from Texas who came here hunting some cattle that had taken up with us—that's all."

"It would have been the decent thing to put them under ground. I don't like to run across that sort of a sight after dark, and somebody else might happen to be riding along this way."

"Then somebody else will be liable to get into the same fix. Come, Joe; give us the news. We are just burning up for it."

"The news is, boys, that I am in luck as usual. Oh, my luck is all right, first class, top of the market—will do to bet on every time."

"Are you sure of that?" replied Casterfield. "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, you know. Your luck is all right, I reckon, provided you don't spoil it. Matt and I were talking about that to-day. We thought that you had seemed to have a splendid chance when you went over to Major Chappelle's, and that it was a pity that you got knocked out in the first round."

"Knocked out?" repeated Musgrove. "There wasn't any knocking out that I know of. I just ooz'd out, as you may say. Why, Simon, my leaving there as I did was the best piece of luck that has happened to me."

"How so?"

"If I had stayed I would have got into the worst kind of a scrape."

"Laid out by the old man?"

"I wasn't afraid of the old man. The real Fred Henning would have come forward and faced me."

"Thunder!" exclaimed Casterfield. "How did you get hold of that?"

"Another stroke of my reliable luck. I happened to go to Lake Charles, and there I happened to strike a copy of the New Orleans *Picayune* that lets me into the whole scheme. That Fred Henning has turned up, and is on his way up here. Coming down the river he met Major Chappelle on the boat, and they had a quarrel and fought a duel."

"About the land?" inquired Simon.

"Not a bit of it. About me."

"About you? How in the name of wonder did that happen? I am getting all tangled up."

Musgrove spread out on his knee a New Orleans daily paper, and surveyed it with an air of complacency.

"I've got it all here," said he. "It's the luckiest thing in the world that I happened to strike this paper. Fred Henning, you see, made a big name for himself on the river as a high-class gambler, and was widely known as Flush Fred. So the papers took up the story, and they made the most of it, giving all the particulars they could get hold of. The *Picayune* has a long report, and I get lots of points from it. They quarreled because the major took that man for me. But I will read it all to you. Listen, now."

Musgrove's comrades paid the closest attention as he read from the New Orleans daily a somewhat florid and verbose account of the difficulty on the Cyclone between Major Chappelle and Flush Fred.

"So the major mistook him for a man named Muggridge," observed Casterfield, "and that man Muggridge had beat the major out of twenty thousand dollars less than a year ago. I suppose that you were that Muggridge, Joe?"

"Of course I was," answered Joe, with conscious pride.

"What became of the twenty thousand?"

"Oh, I don't know. It went the way of all money, I suppose. It was mine, I reckon, and I could do as I pleased with it."

"Um—yes—of course you could do as you pleased with it. Is that all the paper says?"

"There isn't much more, except some points about Henning that may be useful to me. They settled the trouble after awhile, and it turned out that they were part owners of this tract of land, and that Henning was coming on here to see about it. So the paper says that they would go on to Calcasieu together and they ought to be here soon both of them, over at Major Chappelle's. Won't there be a jolly row when Henning gets there and finds himself mixed up with me?"

"I suppose you won't be in a hurry to go and call on the major, Joe?"

"Not if I know myself. That's a pretty safe place to keep away from just now. I know a good thing when I see it, and I've got a fine scheme in my head."

"What is it?"

"It seems that my likeness to that man Henning is something wonderful, and that anybody is liable to be deceived by it. So I propose to work it for all it is worth. He is a rich man and there ought to be plenty of pickings there."

"That is true, Joe, provided you have plenty of points to work on."

"Oh, I had a pretty good stock, and this paper has given me more, and there are others to be got hold of."

"What do you propose to do?"

"While he is away from home, I am going to

make a strike where he lives. While he is carrying on the war here in Calcasien, I will raid the base of his supplies in Concordia."

"That's not a bit of a bad idea, Joe, if it is well carried out. Suppose you take me along." "All right. Glad to have you go, Simon. You have a pretty long head in some things. Let us drink to my luck. I am as dry as a salt-fish."

The Grosse Tete liquor was largely sampled, and Simon Casterfield was full of the project of working the Fred Henning mine in Concordia.

"What sort of a strike do you think of making up there, Joe?" he asked.

"Don't know yet. Haven't worked it up in my mind. I will settle it as we go along. But there's money to be had, of course, and the game can be worked in many ways if we take pains to study them up. It seems to me, Simon, that if we play our cards well we can get that man so tangled up that he won't know whether he is himself or somebody else. Perhaps, too, we can get him run out of the country, or—"

"Just so," interrupted Casterfield. "Get his neck stretched. That would be a good scheme. We must get him out of the way somehow, unless we can use him better alive."

CHAPTER XVII.

SUCCESS AND FAILURES.

WHEN Joe Musgrove and Simon Casterfield reached Martigny, the nearest landing on the river to Fred Henning's estate of Gravelly Bayou, they had settled on the story that they were to tell, though they had not determined where or how they should strike for spoils.

On this point they held varying views, and it remained to be seen which view would prevail.

Musgrove was at once recognized as Fred Henning by the keeper of the tavern at Martigny, and easily explained his speedy return.

When he had negotiated for a horse to take him out into the country, the discussion between the two conspirators was finished.

"What are you going to do, Joe?" inquired Casterfield when they were together.

"I am going home."

"You mean to Fred Henning's place?"

"Yes, of course."

"What for?"

"To see my wife and get some money. What else would a husband want to go home for?"

"You shan't do that, Joe."

"Indeed! Who is running this game? What is the reason that I shan't do it? Are you sympathizing with the woman?"

"No; but I am sympathizing with Joe Musgrove and Simon Casterfield, and I don't want you to break up the game at the first deal."

"How would I break it up?"

"The man's wife would be ever so much more likely to know her own husband than any other people would, and there are many points that you might get picked up on at his own house. But that's not the worst of it. If the resemblance and your smooth talk should succeed in deceiving his wife, who is a very handsome woman, as I have heard, you would desperately and at once fall heels over head in love with her, and then all the fat would be in the fire."

"A woman would naturally be pleased at finding her husband fond of her after an absence. Do you take me for a fool, Simon?"

"Not so bad as that. You are smart enough in some things; but in others you are apt to lose your head. I know just how you would rough in and upset everything, as you did at Major Chappelle's."

"That's the way you have been talking all along," grumbled Musgrove.

"Yes and I am in dead earnest. Unless you promise to stay away from there, I will go with you. Ride out to that old friend of Henning's whose name and residence we got, and strike him for what you can."

Musgrove was compelled to submit to the will of his companion in this matter, and went out to General Brayham's place, the route having been carefully inquired into by Casterfield.

When he got back to Martigny he was highly excited.

"It's the most dead open and shut scheme I ever struck," he said to Casterfield. "The old man and his wife settled on me at once, and I lived them without half trying. I asked him for a thousand dollars, and got it without a word. I am only sorry that I didn't make it five thousand."

"Pity you hadn't. It is your game to go for all you can get."

"So you see, Simon, how easy it would be for me to go to Gravelly Bayou, and make myself at home there, and get a pile."

Casterfield shook his head.

"Why, Simon, it's as easy as rolling off a log. Nobody but Henning himself would doubt that I am he."

"None of that, now, Joe Musgrove. We have come here for cash, and not for a lark. It is the woman you are after, more than money, and I know what would come of that. You would raise the country against us in no time. It is a pity that you didn't strike the old man for more; but we will have to put up with what we've got, and slide out of here."

Casterfield's cautious disposition and firm will carried the day, and the conspirators disappeared from Martigny, regretting that they had not played for higher stakes.

At New Orleans, Joe Musgrove tried another "scheme," but made an ignominious failure.

He called on a business man with whom, as he had learned, Fred Henning had extensive dealings, and requested the advance of a considerable sum of money for the purpose of completing a transaction in the western part of the State.

Fortunately for him it was not John Kremby to whom he applied; but the man of business had an unexpected obligation to offer.

He put on his spectacles, looked the applicant over carefully, and smiled benevolently.

"I suppose it is all right," said he; "but you will remember, Mr. Henning, that you sent me a letter quite recently, in which you said that a scoundrel who was your exact image was making trouble for you. You directed me to pay no draft, even if presented by yourself, unless your signature was attached, together with the private mark which you sent me for greater safety."

"So you presume to doubt whether I am myself," testily replied Musgrove.

"Not in the least, my dear sir. If my own eyes were not sufficient to satisfy me, I have a sure means of identification, thanks to your forethought. Sit down here, Mr. Henning, and sign a receipt for the sum you want, while I go get the money."

Musgrove seated himself at the table that was indicated to him, and the man of business stepped into another room.

When he returned, his customer had disappeared.

"It was surely the other one," he said to his clerk. "I would not have thought it possible. What a mess I would have got into, if Mr. Henning had not forewarned and forearmed me!"

Joe Musgrove hastened to Simon Casterfield, in whose presence he waxed indignant over the outrage of which he had been made the victim.

"It is an infernal shame," said he. "The wretch is cheating me out of my rights. There were thousands that I might have got, if he had not turned the key on me."

"You had better be thankful that it wasn't the key of a prison," replied Casterfield. "It is plain that Fred Henning has dropped on your game, and means to do his best to break it up. No doubt he has sent to lots of people such notices as that man got, and everybody with whom he is likely to have business will be on his guard. We must try to get hold of that signature and private mark."

"Of what use would that be, Simon? If we had them, and if we could use them as we would want to, the fact that I am Henning's double would not help us a particle."

"Perhaps it wouldn't, and perhaps it would. We must go back to Calcasien, Joe, and tackle him there."

When the conspirators returned to their comrades on the Grosse Tete tract, they did not receive an ovation.

Their success had not been so startling as to electrify the other marauders, who were disposed to sneer at the results they had achieved, rather than to applaud them.

Joe Musgrove, angered by this poor appreciation of his efforts, and anxious to make such a mark as would be recognized, declared his intention of so tangling up Fred Henning, by intertwining him with his double, that the gentleman from Concordia would never attempt to claim the Grosse Tete property.

With this purpose he went away on an expedition of his own, and two days elapsed before his comrades saw him again.

When he returned, though he bore the appearance of having been pretty roughly used, he was highly elated.

He freely unbosomed himself to Casterfield and the rest, who were, as usual, expecting some intelligence.

They got it.

"I told you," he exultantly exclaimed, "that my luck was at the top of the market, and would always do to bet on. I have had a pretty rough deal since I left here, but have learned something that is worth knowing, and have played a card that is likely to count."

"I was over at Ryan's Fork night before last, and you may just bet that I passed myself off as Fred Henning, and cut a swell among the natives there."

"But I tumbled into a serious scrape before I got out of the burg."

"I was playing poker with some of them at a little French shebang called the Cacajou, when an idiot of a cattle man accused me of cheating."

"I stood up for myself, of course, and there was a row, and I shot the sucker, and had to skip the town."

"It was such a scrape, you know, as any man was liable to get into."

"After I left there, I struck the Serpent Bayou boys, and would have done well if I had stayed with them. But I went off on a little expedition of my own, and the friends of the sucker whom I had shot came up with me, and

caught me, and took me back to Ryan's Fork, where they were going to string me up to a tall tree."

"I don't see any fun in that," remarked Casterfield.

"That was just where the fun began to come in. I was in a mighty tight place there, with nothing before me but the prospect of dancing on nothing, when who should turn up but my wife!"

"The other man's wife, I mean—Fred Henning's wife. She settled on me right off, and the way she talked for me was a caution to stump speakers."

"She had a hard time with the lynchers, but she swore to them that I wasn't the man they wanted, and at last got them to consent to keep me until morning."

"Then they gave me leave to send for some people who could prove who I was, and so I got word to the Serpent Bayou boys, who acted like perfect gentlemen, I assure you."

"They lighted into town before morning, scared away the suckers who were guarding me, and snaked me out of there in a jiffy—and here I am, with a neck that has not yet felt the caress of a hempen cord."

Joe Musgrove's story was not received with uproarious enthusiasm, and he was not even congratulated upon having saved his precious neck.

"I can't see, Joe," remarked Casterfield, voicing the opinion of the rest, "what there is to brag about in that. It seems to me that you got into a very foolish scrape, and ran your neck into a noose for no good reason, and it is only through a streak of luck that you are alive to tell the story."

"You see, then, that my luck will do to bet on."

"You are lucky in saving your neck—more lucky than you deserved to be. But what have you gained by that spree? Where does the brag come in?"

"Why, Simon, don't you see that the woman—Henning's wife—settled on me just as everybody else did? She had no doubt in the world that I was her husband. She came to see me where I was locked up, and I had to shake her off pretty roughly, so as to give the Serpent Bayou boys a chance to get their work in. Oh, she just froze to me, and that ought to prove to you, Simon, that you were wrong in not letting me go to see her at Gravelly Bayou. I would have made a big strike there."

"Pshaw! If she had seen you close enough, or a little longer, she would have dropped on you. Is that all there is to brag off?"

"No. I have got that man Henning tangled up so that if he should go to Ryan's Fork, or should strike any of that crowd, they'll hang him quicker than a wink, without asking a question or listening to a word. You may bet your lives that I will keep clear of that corner of the parish, and he may take all the chances."

It did not appear to be the opinion of his mates that Joe Musgrove had "played it mighty fine," but he had his own ideas of the matter.

In pursuance of those ideas he rode forth the next day, on an expedition that had for its object the further tangling up of Flush Fred.

He arrayed in his best, and he rode in a northerly direction, through an unsettled portion of the sparsely settled parish.

But it was not yet noon when he came in sight of a settlement which might be indifferently styled, from its appearance, a farm, a plantation, or a ranch.

There was a good house on the tract, and thither he rode, rejoiced by the prospect of a dinner.

As he drew near the house, he perceived two young ladies seated in the shade.

They arose as he approached, and came forward to meet him, and one of them, at least, was smiling and nodding quite pleasantly.

What could Joe Musgrove do but joyfully respond to that friendly greeting?

CHAPTER XVIII.

SUE MAYBURY'S ROMANCE.

DANIEL MAYBURY was a sturdy Kentucky farmer, who had emigrated to Western Louisiana with his wife and son, for the purpose of bettering his fortunes.

He had had a rough time there; but his progress had not been unsatisfactory.

With his family and a few "niggers" and a fair amount of stock, he had settled on a large tract of wild land, at a distance from other habitations, and had resolutely set at work to dig out as much of a fortune as might be found there.

As a farmer he had not succeeded remarkably well, being too far from a market and the conveniences of civilization; but his stock and "niggers" had increased, and there was always a ready sale for cattle and slaves.

But he kept the "black ones," unaware of the fact that a "cruel war" would soon render them valueless as property, and lived largely in the future, the small figures of his expense account consoling him for the loss of former comforts and advantages.

Daniel Maybury and his family, however, led a lonesome life down there, and consequently they were quite elated at some news they received from their old homes.

The first news, to be sure, was sad and depressing, being intelligence of the death of Daniel's brother, who was a widower, and had left his family, because of unfortunate speculations, in anything but comfortable circumstances.

The next letter brought the news that Samuel Maybury's two daughters, being thrown on their own resources, which were decidedly limited, were about to go down into Louisiana, to visit their uncle Daniel, and probably to remain with him, if they should not prove to be too great an incumbrance to him.

This was the news that excited and elated the Maybury family, and they all declared that they would be more than glad to see the girls and have them there.

The suggestion that they might prove an incumbrance was hooted at.

The farm produced plenty for all to eat, and the question of clothing was not an important one in that unsettled locality.

Apart from the fact of relationship, which they appreciated at its full value, the company of the girls would be a great blessing to them in their isolation.

The girls came, received a hearty old-fashioned Kentucky welcome, and were comfortably installed in their new home.

They were not only made welcome, but speedily became favorites.

This was to be expected, as Susan and Mary Maybury—familiarily known as Sue and Mamie—were very pretty and agreeable girls.

Sue was a little the elder of the two, being twenty while Mary was eighteen; but the latter was in her ways and habits elder and more settled than her sister.

Both were pretty well educated, had moved in fairly good society—plenty of it, such as it was—and were quite out of place in the wilds of Western Louisiana.

At least, Sue was.

As for Mary, she made a place for herself much sooner than she might have been expected to.

She quickly fell into the ways of the farm and the farmers, and her aunt Sarah found in her a useful and always willing assistant.

She took a decided interest in everything that went on about the place, and seemed to be really pleased with the free but lonely life of her Louisiana home, never by word or look showing the least symptom of repining or discontent.

With Sue it was quite different.

Though not really indolent, she had no taste for the duties or pleasures of rural existence.

Fond of company, of show and excitement, she was wearied and disgusted by the solitary and eventless life she led there.

Though she doubtless endeavored to avoid the betrayal of these feelings to her kind relatives, she could not help letting them know that she was discontented with her lot.

But Sue was a lovable girl, for all that, and they not only made allowances for her, but followed the example set them by Mary in petting her and making much of her, so as to console her in a measure for the privations she was compelled to endure.

It would naturally be expected—such is the perversity of human nature—that Ben Maybury, a tall and stalwart youth of twenty-two, who was the pride and hope of his parents, would fall desperately in love with the petted and useless sister, rather than with the bright, smart and willing one, who might be a real helpmate to a young man in his position.

But Ben rejoiced the hearts of the old folks by settling on Mary, and they only hoped that she might become disposed to settle on Ben—a hope that seemed to be justified by her amiable attitude toward him.

On their arrival both the girls had a great deal to tell about their life in Kentucky, and perhaps even more about their voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, which was a new and wonderful experience for them, and all they had to say of so much of the world as they had seen gave great delight to Daniel Maybury and his family.

But, when they had got settled down in their new home, and had fully related their experiences, Mary Maybury ceased to refer to them except when requested to do so, not only because they were an old story, but because she wished to avoid any reminiscences that might contrast too painfully with their present life.

But Sue was always dwelling on the past and regretting it.

Not before uncle Daniel, or aunt Sarah, or even Ben, as it was far from her wish to hurt their feelings in any way.

Her sister, who was the sole receptacle of her confidences and complaints, did her best to soothe and console her.

She was fond of recurring to exciting scenes that they had witnessed on the Mississippi, near the end of their trip down the river.

"What a lovely boat was that Cyclone!" she said. "And that duel, Mamie dear, what an

event that was! I am sure that I shall never forget it as long as I live."

"It would be better to forget it," replied her sedate sister. "There is nothing to be gained by dwelling on the past. What we ought to do is to make the most of the present."

"But it is so slow and poky here, Mamie. I would die of disgust if I had nothing to think of but what goes on about these woods and prairie fields. And I have built up quite a romance for that young gentleman who fought the duel with the old planter."

"You have no business to do anything of the kind, Sue. Why should you keep him in your thoughts?"

"Because he was so handsome and so interesting. He reminded me of one of Byron's heroes."

"Bah! You make me sick, Sue, with your romantic nonsense. You have not the faintest chance of ever seeing him again, and he was a married man, too."

"Now, Mamie, you don't know that."

"I know that people on the boat said so."

"That was nothing but talk. None of them pretended to really know anything about him. It is just like women—the mean things—to run a man down in that way."

"But, my dear sister, it is not running a man down to say that he is married."

"Marriage seems to run them down, though—most of them," replied Sue, getting a little off the track.

She kept bringing up the subject of the duel and the handsome duelist, in spite of Mary's indifference to the subject.

One morning, when she was seated with her sister in the shade of the big forest trees that had been left standing in front of the house—Mary with her sewing, and Sue with nothing to do but twirl her thumbs and wish for the unattainable—they had it over again.

"What a lovely thing it would be," said Sue, "if the handsome young gentleman we saw on the Cyclone—the one who fought the duel, you remember—should happen along in this remote and lonely corner of the world!"

"It is impossible," shortly answered Mary.

"Nothing is impossible. It is the unexpected that always occurs."

"I am tired of that subject, Sue. Why do you waste your time in dreaming?"

"Because it is pleasant, and there is nothing else that I care to do. I could dream of him day and night. I shut my eyes, and see him so plainly; I open them again, and—Why, Mamie dear, there he is!"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mary, who was startled by her sister's voice and manner.

"Look! there he comes! Don't you see him? Riding up the road toward the house."

Mary looked up, and clearly saw what she might have seen sooner, if her eyes had not been fastened on her work.

Up the dusty road, over the dry and heated plain that stretched westward and southward from Daniel Maybury's house, came a solitary horseman.

He was a young man, it seemed, with dark hair and mustache, well dressed and with the appearance of a gentleman, in spite of the dust and heat of travel.

Mary thought that she recognized him, but was not sure.

Her eyes were good enough; but she was not so intensely interested in the subject as her sister was.

"It cannot be," she muttered.

"But it is," rejoined Sue. "Oh, I knew him as soon as I saw him! It is he, and he is coming just as I expected him to come."

"As you expected? What do you mean by that?"

"That is only one of my dreams, you know. To think that it should come true! How do I look, Mamie dear?"

"Bother your looks! Of course you look well enough. Who would ever have thought of seeing that man here?"

"I would. We must go and meet him. Come, Mamie!"

The horseman had quickened his pace when he caught sight of the two girls, and was already near the house.

Sue Maybury tripped down to the gate, smiling as she went, and was followed more slowly by her sedate sister.

CHAPTER XIX.

COURTING HIS FATE.

THE stranger seemed to be a little mystified at finding himself so brightly welcomed, but none the less rejoiced.

When he had hitched his horse and was advancing toward the gate, Sue Maybury was standing there holding it open for him.

"How do you do, Mr. Henning?" was her pleasant and quite familiar greeting.

"I hope you are well, ladies," he answered, with a smile that may have looked a little queer to them. "I am glad to see you; but, really—I am sorry to say—I have such a wretched memory. Where have I met you?"

The girl's face fell.

Was it possible that he had never noticed her on the voyage down the Mississippi?

"Have you forgotten the Cyclone?" she asked. Joe Musgrove was quick-witted enough, and in his way was quite a bright and capable young man.

Especially, as Simon Casterfield would have said, where women were concerned.

He had nearly learned by heart the report in the *Piayune* that he had read to his comrades, and had so often gone over the events there detailed, that he had almost succeeded in identifying himself with the real Fred Henning.

When the Cyclone was mentioned, the name at once informed him of the part he would have to play.

It might be a difficult part, as there was no guessing how much these girls knew of the real Fred Henning.

But he did not on that account hesitate to play it, merely perceiving that it might be a little intricate.

Of course he did not have the faintest idea of telling the truth and putting himself in his right place.

He saw before him the kind of an opportunity that he preferred to all others, and he would not have been Joe Musgrove if he had not eagerly availed himself of it.

"Of course I have not forgotten the Cyclone," he said; "but I had not supposed that any of the ladies on the boat would remember me, and would never have thought of meeting one of them here."

"There are two of us," rejoined the girl. "We were both on the guano watching you when you went ashore to fight that dreadful duel."

"I wish I had known it. It would have cheered and inspired me. But I was too much occupied with that unpleasant difficulty into which I was forced, to think of anything outside of it."

"We were so deeply interested in it that you now seem to us like an old friend. Come in and rest, Mr. Henning. My uncle and aunt will be glad to know you, and dinner will soon be ready."

Musgrove accepted the invitation with joyful alacrity.

It seemed to him that never before—not even when his neck was saved by the interposition of a woman—had his wonderful luck served him so well.

His new friends gave orders that his horse should be attended to, and he was afforded an opportunity to free himself from the dust and stain of his ride.

He came forth so fresh and smiling that Sue was delighted.

He hardly had time to learn the names of the girls, when Daniel Maybury came in, with his wife and Ben, and they were made acquainted with the stranger.

Joe Musgrove could play the gentleman when he wanted to, provided that he stuck closely to his part, and did not forget his "lines."

On this occasion he was so careful—not being as yet sure of the ground on which he was treading—that he succeeded admirably.

Uncle Daniel and aunt Sarah admired his appearance and manner, and even Mary was favorably impressed.

But that sedate young lady still had some doubts to solve, and was not altogether sure that their visitor would prove a desirable acquaintance.

"Do you live in this part of the country, Mr. Henning?" she asked.

"I am only a visitor here," he answered. "My home is my estate of Gravelly Bayou, up in Concordia parish. I have come down here to look after a large tract of land in which I am interested. It is called the Grosse Tete tract. Perhaps you have heard of it, Mr. Maybury."

The farmer had heard of it, and he intimated that he had heard no good of it, too.

"It is true," said Musgrove, "that some lawless men who squatted there gave it a bad reputation; but it is a valuable property, and may be expected to increase rapidly in value. I think so well of it that I have left my plantation in charge of my overseer, and expect to devote some time to the development of this tract. I suppose it will surprise you to learn, Miss Maybury, that I am making my home here at the house of the gentleman with whom I fought that duel."

The circumstances connected with the duel had been fully related by the girls and discussed in the family, and this statement of Musgrove's was quite a surprise to all of them.

"It is a fact," said he. "Major Chappelle and I became the best of friends after that adventure, and I am quite at home among his charming family. I must inform you that he is part owner with me of the Grosse Tete tract, and it was that property that caused the difficulty between us."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mary. "I understood on the boat that it was—a—something else."

"I am sorry to say that a false report was spread to the effect that a gamblers' quarrel was at the bottom of the difficulty. I saw such a statement in a New Orleans paper. But the major and I wrote jointly to the editor, protesting against the injustice of the report, and a prompt retraction was published."

"I was sure that there was a mistake about that," Sue enthusiastically declared. "If we had happened to become acquainted with Mr. Henning on the boat, Mamie dear, he would have quickly denied the stories of the gossips."

Joe Musgrove drew a breath of relief. He had at last learned where he stood. The two girls had not formed the acquaintance of the real Fred Henning, and it would be easy enough to deny any hearsay reports that should not suit the part he wanted to play.

But Mary Maybury came to the charge again and worried him a little.

"Is your wife here with you, Mr. Henning?" she mildly inquired.

"My wife?" herepeated, with a well-managed air of surprise.

He had not anticipated that line of inquiry, but was prompt to meet the emergency.

A glance at Sue assured him that a wife was not among the possessions that he ought to acknowledge.

"Are you not a married man?" Mary blandly asked.

"I have been married," he answered a little gloomily; "but I have been a widower nearly a year. My wife died when we had been married hardly six months, and I am almost ashamed to say that I did not grieve as some husbands do. The truth is that our union was a family arrangement, brought about by the desire to join two very valuable pieces of property. My relatives pressed it, and her relatives desired it, and she was so fond of me, poor girl—but you must pardon me, my friends; it is a painful subject to me. The marriage brought me a large accession of fortune; but I had enough without that, and I am free to confess that it was not such a marriage as I would have wished."

The unfortunate widower was so gloomy just then, that his hearers respected his tender feelings by a period of silence, and then changed the subject.

As a romancer Joe Musgrove was a success—at least, in the eyes of Sue Maybury.

She had built up a fine edifice of romance for him, and he had put on the top story, with a mansard roof and ornamental iron railings.

A flush of triumph was on her face, and the sedate Mary was frowned upon by all but Ben.

A young, handsome and wealthy widower was such a prize as the Maybury family might be expected to appreciate.

Joe Musgrove soon wormed himself into the good graces of Daniel Maybury.

It was easy to do so, as the revelations he had made concerning himself had paved the way for further advances.

Having learned that Daniel Maybury had become quite an extensive cattle-raiser, he accounted for his presence in that quarter by informing the farmer that he was looking for some good stock.

It was his purpose, he said, to turn the Grosse Tete tract into a cattle-farm, and he wanted to purchase largely if he could find stock to suit him.

The farmer suggested that the present occupants of the tract, from what he had heard of them, were such as to render such an enterprise risky, to say the least of it, and that he would need to get rid of them before investing heavily.

"There will be no trouble about that," promptly replied Musgrove. "I am inclined to believe that they have got a worse reputation than they deserve. It is probable that some of them will become valuable assistants to me, and the rest I can easily buy off. I assure you, Mr. Maybury, that I have been over the Grosse Tete tract again and again, and have not been molested in the least."

This, it may be remarked, was an undoubted oasis of truth in the desert of Joe Musgrove's lies.

He went on to inquire concerning Daniel Maybury's cattle, and was even particular in getting information of their number, where and how they were kept, and what sort of a watch, if any, was placed upon them.

If Simon Casterfield had been there, he would have given his partner credit for combining business with pleasure, and for having an eye open to the chances of easy and profitable raids.

But he also kept an eye open for pleasure, to which the rest of his advances were merely preliminary, and did not scruple to allow it to be seen that pretty Sue Maybury had taken his fancy.

He was sharp enough to be aware of the fact that it would not be a difficult matter to gain possession of that fortress, as the garrison was already disposed to surrender.

But he remembered the ignominious failure he had made at Major Chappelle's, and was determined not to make a similar mistake in this affair.

Consequently he made no open demonstration toward the young lady, but conducted himself in a quiet and gentleman-like manner, and it was only through his glances and tones that the state of his feelings could be perceived.

Yet it was evident, as Daniel Maybury said

after he rode away, that the wealthy young widower was courting Sue.

It was also a fact, though not so evident, that Joe Musgrove was courting his fate.

CHAPTER XX.

TURNING THE TABLES.

FLUSH FRED HENNING, while he was waiting for the settlement of the legal formalities which Major Chappelle believed to be necessary, or at least proper, before they should set at work to drive the intruders from the Grosse Tete tract, did not find it a difficult matter to dispose of his spare time.

His wife and child were there, and General Brayham was there, and in the society of these and of Major Chappelle's family he found abundant opportunity for reasonable enjoyment.

He also found pastime in hunting and in riding about the vicinity with the major and Frank Chappelle and Charley Wynne, all of whom voted him a splendid companion.

Kate insisted that he should not go out of sight of Rose Lawn alone, lest he should be mistaken for the rascal by whom she had been so badly deceived.

Such a mistake, she feared, might occur at such a time and manner—away from his friends and beyond the possibility of identification—as might cause it to prove fatal.

Fred was mindful of the chances of the danger she feared, and was usually more than willing to comply with her desires; but no man likes to feel fettered, and the best-disposed husband does not wish to be always tied to his wife's apron-string.

Besides, Charley Wynne was compelled to look after his own affairs, and Major Chappelle and Frank easily found plenty of employment on the plantation, and General Brayham was getting to be too old a man to run about.

Thus it happened that Fred sometimes rode off alone, and on one of these occasions he met with an adventure.

On his rides he was usually in fatigue uniform, rather than on dress parade.

That is to say, though he was always neat and presentable, his garments were rougher and better fitted for service than the attire he sported at Rose Lawn.

Consequently his resemblance to Joe Musgrove was increased by his apparel.

His adventure gave him an opportunity to prove and test the resemblance.

As he was riding near the edge of a piece of woods, he was hailed by a horseman who was approaching by a road that led through the timber.

"Hello!" was the first hail; but Fred did not answer it.

His name was not "Hello," and he did not approve of that style of salutation.

"Hello, Joe Musgrove!" was the next hail, and that arrested his attention.

He knew that Joe Musgrove was the name, or one of the names, of his double, and he had a fancy to see how far the mistake would be carried, and what would come of it.

He halted, and turned to face the horseman, who was a man of rough appearance—probably one of the Grosse Tete squatters.

Fred Henning had only his revolver, while the other carried a rifle; but a collision, if one should come, must be at close quarters, and for that he was well prepared.

It was quite natural that he should wish to test the resemblance, with the hope of finding a way to turn the tables on his troublesome double.

"I am glad to git sight o' you at last, Joe Musgrove," said the stranger. "How do you find yerself, anyhow?"

"Well enough—I haven't lost myself yet," answered Fred, in a surly tone that he assumed for the purpose of disguising his voice.

"You needn't be so durned gruffy about it. It looked as ef you mought ha' lost yerself, bein's we hain't seen you at the old place fur nigh two days. Whar've you been now? Whar'd you come from this time?"

"From Major Chappelle," answered Fred, at a venture.

"The deuce you say! Arter the dose you got thar a while ago we allowed that the major's was jest about the last place you'd keer to show up at."

"Oh, I am all right there now."

"That sounds mighty queer, Joe, bein's that Fred Hennin's thar. Should think you'd git picked up."

This did not upset Fred in the least, as he was ready with an answer.

"Did I say that I'd been at the house, or among the folks? I know a better game than that, and before long you shall see something that will astonish you. There's money in it, too, and big money."

"Glad to hear that. But you'd better be more keerful than you've been lately, or your hide won't be safe."

"Leave me alone for that," gruffly answered Fred. "What's the news on the tract?"

"We've sent off that lot o' Texas cattle. Got some o' the Serpent Bayou boys to take sheers an' run 'em East. Reckon it was the best we could do. 'Tain't right fur us to handle the

same lot too often. Say, Joe, you were right about the Texans."

This was a puzzler.

Fred did not know what was meant by the remark, and wisely held his tongue.

At the same time recognizing the possibility of discovery he made sure that his revolver was where it could be handily used.

"They orter been put under ground," continued the squatter. "But Simon is sech a brute. I sometimes think he likes to keep his dead men where he ken look at 'em."

"Better put them under ground," muttered Fred.

"So I say. When'll we see you at the shanty, old man?"

"I don't know. I've got something on my mind just now."

"Suthin' mighty queer, I should say. You know that we are goin' to strike Huntoon's to-night."

Fred did not know it; but it was evidently a subject in which he ought to take an interest.

"Well, do you want me?" he asked.

"Want you? Well, I should say we do. How would we git along without you? Ain't it your scheme? and who but you ken show us whar to go an' what to do? Durned ef you don't beat me, Joe Musgrove. You ain't a bit like yerself to-day."

As the squatter looked hard at him, Fred felt for his revolver again, prepared to change the part he was playing at a second's notice.

"I told you that I've got something on my mind," he said. "I will meet you there to-night."

"Where?"

"At Huntoon's, a little before midnight. I will not fail to find you, and if you play your part of the game as well as I play mine, everything will be lovely. I can't stop to talk any longer. I've got to go back to Major Chappelle's to see a man I promised to meet there."

And Flush Fred turned his horse and rode away.

The squatter looked after him as he went, muttering and grumbling.

However much Fred might have prevaricated during that interview, his last remark was the exact truth.

He made such quick time to Rose Lawn that his horse was all in a foam when he got there, and he was himself considerably flurried.

Without stopping even to hitch his horse, he ran up to the house, where Major Chappelle was seated on the veranda, with General Brayham and Frank.

"Where is Huntoon's?" demanded Fred, before they could ask him a question.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ARMY OF PROTECTION.

FLUSH FRED'S flurried and excited manner, the haste of his ride and arrival, and his strange and unexpected question, upset his hearers for the moment so that they did not know how to answer him.

"Where is Huntoon's?" repeated the planter, a little dazed by the suddenness of the query. "What do you mean by jumping on a man like that, and asking where is Huntoon's?"

"I want to know where and what it is. Is there a village, or a plantation, or a farm, or a tract, or anything of the kind, that is known as Huntoon's?"

"Well, really, Fred, I can't seem to think of such a place just now. Do you know anything about it Frank?"

"Yes, sir. There is an old man named Huntoon, who lives up the Divide, near what is called the ridge road, though there is no ridge to speak of."

"Is he a farmer?" inquired Fred.

"He has a small farm and a few niggers. I have heard that he has money, and that he has lately bought some fine cattle for breeding purposes."

"That's the man," exclaimed Fred. "That's the place they mean to strike."

"Who are going to strike, and what for?" demanded the planter. "What is it that has got you worked up so, Henning?"

"Give me something to drink, and I will tell you all about it. My throat is so dry that I can scarcely talk."

When he had quenched his thirst he told the story of his encounter with the squatter, and told it as briefly as possible, as the day was then near its close, and time was pressing.

"Now you see," he said, "that we have here a chance to kill two birds with one stone. We must warn this man Huntoon, and we must help him, too. At the same time we may hope to have a fair and legal chance to wipe out some of those scoundrels who have squatted on our property."

"That's so," responded the major. "We must do that very thing; but we must act intelligently as well as promptly. The only trouble is that we don't know how many of those marauders we may have to meet."

"Never mind that," replied Flush Fred.

"The main question is, how many men can we muster to meet them? Ah! here comes Hark Sanders, just in the nick of time. He can tell us what to do."

The bronzed hunter was speedily put in possession of the facts that were known to Fred Henning, and his face lighted up at the prospect of a fray.

"We ain't got no time to lose," said he, "and we can't go around to hunt up men. I kin git Dave Wintersmith, who lives right here, and here's me—that's two—and old man Huntoon an' his son—that's four—and you, Mr. Hennin', an' Frank—that's six—"

"And me—that's seven," interrupted Major Chappelle.

"And me—that's eight," broke in General Brayham.

Fred protested that his old friend ought not to count himself in the expedition, as it would be too severe for a man of his years.

"Years!" indignantly exclaimed the veteran. "Do you call me old? You ought to know better, Fred Henning. Let the campaign open, and give me a chance to face the enemy, and you will see whether I am old or not. I can see as far, and shoot as straight, as any of you."

"That settles the question," said Major Chappelle. "There are eight of us, that we know of. How far is it to Huntoon's, Hark?"

"Twenty mile and up'ard."

"We will have to start soon and ride fast. How far is Huntoon's from Charley Wynne's place?"

"We can pick up Charley as we go," said Frank. "It won't be much out of the way, and I can ride around and get him."

"Oh, there are plenty of us," joined in Fred. "More would be in the way. All we want is to be in a hurry. We can't afford to miss this chance."

So the expedition was organized, and it was hastily but well equipped.

What with examining and loading rifles and pistols, and saddling the best horses the market afforded, Rose Lawn presented a busy scene for a while.

The women of the house were naturally less enthusiastic about the affair than the men were.

It was true that they were not to take part in the expected fighting; but there were two husbands, a son, a brother, a lover, an old friend, who were arming themselves for what looked like war, and the prospect was not a pleasing one to the women.

But "men must work, and women must weep," and the preparations for warfare were not in the least abated.

Dave Wintersmith, another veteran of the Mexican war, was brought to the house by Hark Sanders, and under the guidance of the hunter the party set out, all well mounted and well armed.

As they started, Kate Henning gave voice to the opinion of the female contingent.

"We wish you good luck, but we wish you would not go."

They rode rapidly, and made as short a cut as they could into what was known as the ridge road.

Frank Chappelle started off at the top of his speed to make a *detour* by Charley Wynne's place, and easily got back to the party after "picking up" that young gentleman.

They reached Huntoon's about an hour before midnight, and found there a small house, with sufficient outbuildings and negro-quarters and accommodations for cattle.

It was necessary to arouse the inmates, who were not willing to open the house until a parley had satisfied them of the quality and purposes of their visitors.

Mr. Huntoon, though an elderly man, was found to be a hale and vigorous one, and his son Mark was a bright and manly young fellow, who fraternized at once with Charley Wynne and Frank Chappelle.

When the purpose of the visiting party had been fully explained, Mr. Huntoon was asked about the safety of his cattle.

"They are all out on the range," he answered, "except the blooded cattle that I lately got home."

"These are probably what the rascals are after," suggested Flush Fred.

"I keep them in a grass patch near the house, but I've got a lot with a high stake-and-ridered fence that I can corral them in, if you think it best."

There was no question that it would be best, and Mr. Huntoon's servants were instructed to quietly pen up the valuable stock.

The white men held a council of war to settle upon their mode of operation.

It was impossible to say from what direction the marauders would come, or how they would proceed to execute their plundering plan.

"We can reduce the thing down a little," remarked Flush Fred. "If that fellow Musgrove happened to get to them before night, the game that I played will be exposed, and they will have sense enough to keep away from here."

"If they have not seen him, they may be expected to come up this way to meet him, and will be likely to wander about in search of him."

"When they fail to find him, they may take it into their heads to throw up their hands and pass out."

"We must go at them, whether they come at us or not, and we ought to put out pickets, so that we may know when and where to strike."

Fred's opinion prevailed; but it was decided that only two scouts should be sent out, the main body remaining at the house and waiting for their opportunity.

Hark Sanders was sent down the road, as the marauders would be most likely to come from that quarter, and Mark Huntoon was directed to scout near the house, so as to cover the other approaches.

CHAPTER XXII.

JESSE SLOPER SLOPES.

AFTER the two scouts had gone out it was discovered that the hour did not lack much of midnight.

The house was closed and darkened, and the men, with their weapons ready for use, waited impatiently for some intelligence that should give them the cue for action.

Fred Henning was the most eager and excited man in the party, and the others had hard work to dissuade him from going out on his own account, to make sure that Hark Sanders and Mark Huntoon should not miss their men.

"It is just possible," he said, "that the fellow Musgrove may come with the rest of the rascals, and I would hate to miss the chance of making an end of his frauds and himself together."

"Do you think, Fred, that you could find it in your heart to shoot your double?" asked Major Chappelle.

"I don't know about that; but I know that I will be glad of a chance to fire into his crowd in the darkness, in the hope of hitting him."

"That is all very well, and you shall have the chance when we find the crowd. But we mustn't rush things and get mixed up. If we should all follow your motion, the thieves might slip up and take the place when we were out of sight. If part of us should scatter around, we might fire into each other in mistake for the enemy. No, Fred; you must stay right here and wait for news."

News they soon had, and it was the old reliable Hark Sanders that brought it.

"They're comin'," he said. "I sneaked down along the edge of the timber nigh the road, an' heerd thar hosses comin' up."

"I laid an' waited fur 'em, an' war cluss enough to hear some o' thar talk."

"They war grumblin' an' cussin' beca'se they hadn't seen nothin' o' Joe Musgrove, and was wonderin' what had become of him."

"They war still comin' on; but I was afeard they mought scatter or turn back, and so I hurried up here to tell you'ns."

"Thar don't seem to be more'n five or six o' 'em."

Flush Fred jumped up and seized his rifle.

"Come on!" he ordered. "We must go and find them, for fear that they may miss finding us. We know just where they are now, and we have no excuse for remaining in the house another minute."

His impetuosity carried his companions off their feet, and they hurried out after him, Hark Sanders leading the way.

The hunter led them through the darkness—the night being moonless and cloudy—down a sloping field in the cover of the growing crop, to a piece of woods that lay at the foot of the field and along the road.

Hardly had they entered the wood when their guide raised his hand warningly, and sunk upon the ground.

The others followed his example, and crawled after him until they reached the cover of some bushes near the road.

At a little distance from their hiding-place were a few dark figures on horseback.

Another came from the open ground and joined them.

After conversing together a little while, they moved forward, talking as they went, and a part of their talk was heard by the lurkers in the woods.

"Did you see no sign of him at all, Matt?" one of them asked.

"Didn't git a sight or a smell of him, and I cirkilated about right sharp, too."

"Did you call him?"

"Called as loud as I dar'd to. I went nigh the house, you see."

"The infernal scallawag! If we don't make him pay for lying and fooling us in this way, we ought to be kicked all over creation. I don't a bit like the notion of taking all this trouble for nothing."

"Why not go and do the job without him?" suggested the other.

"It won't do. Halt right here, boys, and settle the question whether we are to go on or go back."

They halted, and the leader insisted that they would only get into trouble by going on, as nobody but Joe Musgrove knew where to find the cattle they wanted.

"He said they was in a pastur' lot near the house," said another. "We ought to be smart enough to find 'em an' snake 'em out o' thar."

"Hush! Wait a moment. Look here, boys."

Their horses were drawn together in a huddle, and the leader seemed to be giving instructions to the others in an undertone.

"They have seen us," whispered Flush Fred to his nearest neighbor in the bush. "Fifty to one that they mean to skip."

"Hush!" answered Major Chappelle. "Let us wait and see what they are going to do."

"We ought to take them while we've got them."

Suddenly, and without a word or sign of warning, the marauders verified Flush Fred's prediction by proceeding to "skip."

They did not attempt to escape down the road, or up the road; but, as if they knew exactly where their lurking foes were located, they dashed all together into the timber on the other side.

Fred Henning's rifle broke the stillness at the moment of the start, and its report was followed by tardy and scattering shots from his companions.

More than one yell or shriek followed the firing, and one man was seen to fall from his horse; but the rest of the marauders, gaining the shelter of the trees, speedily disappeared in the darkness of the forest.

There was no chance to pursue them, as their foes were afoot, and with horses the attempt would not have been advisable in the night and through the forest.

Flush Fred led his friends forth from the brush, and they hurried out into the road, not with the idea of doing more execution, but for the purpose of learning what execution had been done.

One of the scoundrels, as they knew, had fallen under their fire, and his horse had scampered away.

They found him on the ground, groaning and screeching with pain and terror.

Hark Sanders had picked up a piece of "lightwood," which was speedily converted into a torch for the examination of the wounded man.

As the bullet had entered his breast and passed through his body, it was their unanimous opinion that there was no fear of his recovery.

He was, however, able to speak, and his physical and moral condition was so largely improved by the judicious use of a flask of liquor, that he was able and willing to tell all he knew, as long as the lamp of life held out to burn.

He said that his name was Jesse Sloper, and that he had recently come from Texas and joined the squatters, who were a mean and murderous set, and he was glad to get away from them even at the price of his life.

There could be no doubt of the murderous proclivities of the marauders, as he proved that point by a recital of the slaughter of the two Texans who had followed him.

The leader of the band was Joe Musgrove, concerning whom Jesse Sloper knew little except by hearsay, as he had lately been absent from the Grosse Tete tract most of the time.

It should be noted that whenever his narrative seemed to become especially interesting to those about him, the wounded man grew so weak and faint that nothing but prompt and plentiful applications of the liquor flask would revive him and set him on the track again.

Joe Musgrove, he said, was the man who planned the raid upon Mr. Huntoon's cattle and he had promised to meet them there and direct the operations of the band, but they had seen nothing of him and it was the belief of the others that he had turned traitor.

He would have a rough settlement with his partners when he got back to the tract, and it would serve him right.

They were arguing the question of going on with the enterprise or abandoning it, when they discovered that an ambush had been laid for them, and they scattered.

He knew that he was fatally wounded, and believed that one of the other had been hit.

There was little in what he told that was new to his hearers; but he confirmed much that they had already heard or discovered.

Whether it was the relief to his conscience that he had gained by telling his story, or whether it was the stimulus that had been required to keep him up to the task of telling it, his physical condition appeared to have improved quite notably.

His wound had ceased to bleed, and he was so easy and at the same time so bright, that the men about him began to look at each other dubiously, as if his improvement was not altogether pleasing to them.

"It looks as if this shriven sinner is not going to make a die of it, after all," remarked Major Chappelle.

"I suppose we must do what we can for him," responded Fred Henning. "If he lives, he may be useful to us."

"About as much as a snake," muttered Hark Sanders. "Who'd ha' thort he'd turn out to be sich a deceivin' crittur?"

It was agreed that they ought to prepare a litter and take him up to the house, and one was made of poles and branches.

The liquor was nearly exhausted; but the patient's spirits rose as the supply in the flask fell.

When the litter was finished, four of the men took hold of him to lift him upon it; but they did not seem, somehow, to have much heart for their work.

Suddenly Jesse Sloper stretched himself out stiffly, gasped, kicked convulsively, and his earthly career was ended.

A simultaneous sigh of relief escaped from those about him.

"All that trouble fur nuthin'!" muttered Hark Sanders. "The darned crittur was deceivin' to the last."

"It must have been a consolation to him to know that he confessed before he died," observed General Brayham.

"Twas a bigger consolation to him to feel that he had plenty o' whisky to float off on."

"What shall we do with him?" asked Fred Henning. "It would hardly be worth while to carry him up to the house now."

Mr. Huntoon said that he would send his son Mark down with some of the "black ones" to give Jesse Sloper a decent burial.

They went back to the house, and the visitors, after receiving the thanks of the farmer, mounted their horses and rode home, not altogether satisfied with the results of their night's work.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"DEATH TO THE TRAITOR."

FLUSH FRED'S next adventure in connection with his double was an unexpected one, and, it must be admitted, somewhat unsatisfactory to himself.

On this occasion he deceived nobody, and nobody was deceived by him.

It happened the day following the Huntoon expedition.

As Kate appeared to have come to the conclusion that he was pretty well able to take care of himself, and as no company but his own was available just then, he went out hunting alone.

Perhaps the more accurate statement would be that he strayed forth with the avowed object of hunting and the real object of exercise, having before him possibilities of deer and reasonable certainties of jack rabbits.

The upshot of his hunting was that he found something which he had not lost or looked for, and he was so excited by the adventure that he hastened back to Rose Lawn and related it to his friends.

It appeared that a lack of the visible presence of deer, combined with a suspicion of laziness on his own part, had caused him to confine his attention to jack rabbits.

So he settled himself in an easy position in a covert near the edge of a piece of timber, before which was a bit of grass-grown prairie on which the jack rabbits were supposed to disport themselves.

There he made himself comfortable, and waited patiently for the game to come along.

Nothing came that way that could be mistaken for game; but something else came.

"When I caught sight of that man," said Flush Fred, "he was riding across the open, with his left side toward me, and his face turned away from me."

"But there was something so familiar in his form, and in his way of sitting his horse and carrying his head, that a chill came over me and took away my nerve."

"I could not imagine what there was in my man that could affect me in that way, and I had no chance to study the question, as the thing was revealed to me in a flash."

"All of a sudden he turned his horse, almost facing me, and I had a fair and square look at him."

"That look nearly knocked me down."

"He was my double!"

"I had never really believed that he could be my exact image, or that his resemblance to me could be so perfect as to deceive those who knew me well."

"Even my experience of yesterday had left me with some doubt on that point."

"All that was driven out of my head as quick as a wink when I saw the man, and I fairly shivered at the sight."

"I suppose I must have felt pretty much as a man might who should see his own ghost."

"He had spurred his horse as he turned, and he rode swiftly across the open and into the timber on the other side."

"Why didn't you shoot him?" demanded Major Chappelle.

"Shoot him? Why didn't I shoot him? Could I shoot myself, and without giving myself a chance for my life? It would be worse than committing suicide. I could more easily have put my rifle to my own head and pulled the trigger with my foot."

"That is strange," remarked Frank.

"It is the exact fact. I have heard or read of a man who stood in front of a mirror and fired a pistol at his image in the glass. He fell back and died, and they found a blue spot on his forehead, as if a bullet had gone in there."

"I don't believe that story," said Kate. "It was the glass alone that suffered."

"The story may not be true, my dear; but it is a fact that I did not dare to shoot at my double. I don't suppose I considered the thing

at the time, or turned it over to find out what was the matter with me. I was under a sort of spell that would not even let me think. I only felt that there was a scare on me, such as I was unable to shake off."

"I wish he had got a chance to see you," remarked the major. "I would have been glad to know what he would do."

"He had the chance. He did see me. Before he got out of sight the spell passed off, or partly passed off, and I jumped up and ran out into the open, shouting and yelling at him to stop."

"I was brave enough, you see, when his back was turned."

"He stopped his horse at the sound of my voice, turned around, and faced me again."

"But it was only for an instant."

"As soon as he caught sight of me, there came a white and scared look into his face, as suddenly as if he had been struck by lightning."

"Then he wheeled around, dug the spurs into his horse, and galloped away in regular break-neck style."

Fred Henning's narrative was not largely commented upon by his friends, their silence showing that his conduct upon the occasion of meeting his double had not won their entire approbation.

If they had been able to put themselves in his place, perhaps they might have held a different opinion.

It would have been highly interesting to them, no doubt, to be made acquainted with the feelings of the false Fred Henning on being confronted with the genuine article.

At the instant of that confrontation, as Flush Fred told the story, he had galloped away as if panic-stricken.

He continued that headlong scamper, tearing through the forest like a crazy man, and scarcely slackening his speed until he reached the Grosse Tete tract and came in sight of "the old place."

As Joe Musgrove was known to be a daring fellow, cool and unshaken in the presence of danger, it is hardly necessary to say that his hasty and continued flight was not caused by actual fear.

It must rather be supposed that he was seized by an unreasoning and overpowering dread, similar to that which took the nerve out of Flush Fred.

He was filled with it up to the moment of his arrival at "the old place," and nothing pressed upon his mind but that unexpected and startling encounter, which even shut out for the time the thought of his intrigue with pretty Sue Maybury.

That affair had of late occupied his attention to the exclusion of almost everything else, causing him to neglect his comrades and the "business" in which he was engaged with them.

He saw no reason, especially as Simon Casterfield had lately shown a disposition to assume the leadership of the party, why he should not go his own gait and pursue his own objects.

For once the image of Sue Maybury had been driven from his mind, and he was full of the story with which he intended to surprise his partners.

But they anticipated him, having a surprise of their own in store for him.

They had discovered his approach, and had prepared for him a serious and unpleasant reception.

Full of the subject that had so strongly excited him, Joe Musgrove hurriedly hitched his horse and dashed into the house.

Hardly had he entered when he was seized by two men, one of whom had been waiting for him on each side of the door.

They were Simon Casterfield and Steve Lowry.

Matt Burns and Leon Mascada joined their forces to those of the other two, and the leader of the band was quickly disarmed and bound.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, as they seated him in a chair and ranged themselves in front of him.

Their dark and ugly looks, and the threatening manner in which they handled their weapons, told him that the situation was serious.

But he did not for an instant suspect its real meaning, supposing it to be an insurrection against his authority, probably a demonstration for the purpose of deposing him as captain.

It was then that he fully sustained his reputation for courage and coolness.

All his excitement left him instantly, and he was as solid as a rock and as calm as a pond.

"I want to know what you mean by this performance," he again demanded, as his first indignant inquiry had brought no immediate answer.

"We are going to have a settlement with you—that's what we mean," replied Simon Casterfield.

"Is that all you want? Well it is easy enough to come to any kind of a reasonable settlement without such a fuss as this. I suppose that you, Simon, want to be the leader here. You are welcome to be. I don't care for the job. I

have never been much of a captain, anyhow, as we have done nothing but what the crowd has agreed to do. Take the place, if you want it, and may good luck go with you!"

"You're off the track," growled Steve Lowry. "If Simon wants to be the boss, he's never said so, as far as I've heard."

"What is the matter with you, then?"

"You are what's the matter. What this here performance means is nothin' but death to the traitor!"

Joe Musgrove was cool enough then. If they had calculated upon frightening him, they were mistaken in the man.

He sneered; but the sneer melted into a pleasant smile.

"Do you really mean me?" he inquired.

"Am I the traitor you are after? If so, I would like to know whether you mean to kill me off-hand, or first to inform me what I have betrayed. If I am any sort of a traitor, I haven't found it out yet."

"Herman Steenbrook has found it out," said Casterfield. "He is in his bed in the other room with a bullet in his leg. Poor Jesse Sloper has found it out, too. He is dead, no doubt, up there at Huntoon's."

"At Huntoon's?" repeated Musgrove. "Why, what has been going on at Huntoon's?"

"Oh, you don't know—don't you? All news to you—ain't it? Perhaps you will deny that when you met Steve Lowry yesterday you promised to join us at Huntoon's last night and help us to make the strike there."

Joe Musgrove's face and manner showed that he was extensively mystified.

"It is certain that I shall deny making any such promise," said he. "I never spoke to Steve or saw him yesterday."

"Oh, you infernal liar!" exclaimed Lowry.

Musgrove's face turned fiery red.

"You wouldn't dare to call me a liar if I was loose," said he.

"Yes, I would, though. It's my word ag'inst yours, and I stand ready to back myself up. 'Twas bad enough to play that dirty game on us, without tryin' to lie out of it. You know that you met me yesterday in the shank of the evenin', and we had quite a talk, and you promised to jine us up by Huntoon's last night, to show us whar to go and what to do. You said that you had just come from Major Chappelle's, and when I told you that you didn't act a bit like yerself, you broke off and said that you was in a hurry to git back to the major's. You did go back then, and stacked the keards ag'inst us, so that when we got nigh Huntoon's a party was layin' fur us thar."

"Yes, indeed," joined in Casterfield. "And if we hadn't dropped on the game, every man of us would have been wiped out. Oh, you cursed traitor!"

Musgrove did not laugh then; but his face lighted up, and he spoke firmly and freely.

"Hold on, there, both of you! I think I see what the trouble was, as I have had a dose of the same medicine to-day, myself. I don't blame you a bit, boys, for the way you have pitched into me; but you had better go easy. You have been badly swindled, no doubt; but I don't happen to be the man who swindled you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PREPARING FOR HOUSEKEEPING.

JOE MUSGROVE'S statement was received with utter incredulity; but that did not worry him in the least.

"You may doubt and you may wonder," said he, "and you may call me a liar as much as you want to; but it happens that I have the deadwood on you here, and can prove every word I say. There was something that I saw only a little while ago, and I hurried here to tell you about it, but you got ahead of me with this business."

Matt Burns slapped his hand on his knee with the air of a man who has suddenly discovered something.

"Boys, I reckon the capt'in has got us thar," he remarked.

"What do you mean, Matt?" demanded Casterfield.

"Never mind what I mean. Let Joe tell his own story. I reckon I know how it'll come out—that's all."

"We don't mean to let him lie out of it, though," interposed Lowry. "I am likely to believe my own eyes and ears sooner than any other man's tongue. If it wasn't you who put up that game on us, who was it?"

"I wish it was as easy to make up for the harm that has been done, as it is to answer that question."

"Answer it, then. Who was the man?"

"My double—the man who looks exactly like me—that Fred Henning who is stopping at Chappelle's."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Lowry, quite taken aback.

"Darned strange that we never thought of that before," growled Casterfield.

"That is the strangest part of the business," remarked Musgrove. "That is, it seems strange at the first look; but when I come to think of it, I don't blame you or wonder at it. You

knew that there was such a man, Steve, and knew as much about him as I did; but you let him fool you. You said just now that I did not act a bit like myself, and yet you never dropped on the truth. The resemblance, as you know, is so close that it has deceived some pretty smart people, and that man was sharp enough to take advantage of it. But you must have given him a fine opening, Steve, and I doubt if your wits were all in good working order."

"I reckon I shall have to give in, Joe. The fact is that I never once thought of t'other feller, and wouldn't have thought of him yet if you hadn't brought him out. Now that you speak of him, I remember that he didn't have your ways, and that I wondered what on airth had come over Joe Musgrove, and— Oh, thunder an' snakes! what's the good o' talkin'? Anybody would ha' been fooled that way; but I feel like punchin' my durned head fur gittin' caught an' skinned so easy!"

"It is a great pity, boys, that you got into that scrape, but I can't see that any of us are to blame. I am sorry that the resemblance of that man to me has brought trouble on us, when I had hoped that it would help us to make more than one good strike. You know what a good turn it served me when I came near getting my neck stretched at Ryan's Fork."

"There ain't much harm done," responded Casterfield. "Nothing at all, compared with what it might have been. Herman will soon get well of his hurt, and that Jesse Sloper will hardly be missed, except at meal times and when the jug is opened. I reckon we will have our wits about us after this."

"Just think of it, Simon. How unreasonable it was to accuse me! If there was anything I had a chance to gain by playing such a game, I can't guess what it was. And to think that I should hang around Chappelle's, when, as you put it, I had been kicked out of there for being too fresh. Why, I wouldn't let such a fool lead me to make a raid on a chicken-roost."

"I admit, Joe, when I come to think it over, that it was absurd. But we never thought of the other man, and—bah!—as Steve says, what's the good of talking?"

"Well, boys, if you are convinced that I am no traitor, I wish you would untie me and give me something to drink. Then I will tell my story."

Musgrove's wish was speedily complied with, and the men who had meditated his execution joined him in drinking success and long life to himself and themselves.

Then he told the story of his encounter with Fred Henning.

There was not much of it; but it struck his hearers very strangely, the behavior of both Joe Musgrove and Flush Fred being quite unaccountable to them.

"Why didn't ye shoot the cuss?" demanded Steve Lowry.

"Shoot nothing!" replied Musgrove. "Why didn't he shoot me? you had better ask."

"Yes; why didn't he?"

"That is more than I know. Maybe he was struck all of a heap, as I was. I know that all my senses flew away from me at the sight of him, and I thought of nothing but making a blind race for the tract. I tell you, boys, I never felt so queer in my life as when I looked back and saw myself standing there and yelling at myself."

"It is a pity that you didn't wipe him out," remarked Casterfield; "but I suppose you thought yourself lucky in not getting wiped out."

Musgrove, who really felt somewhat ashamed of himself, was quick to change the subject.

Besides, his comrades were so well disposed to him by way of making amends for their rough treatment, that it was a good time to ask a favor of them.

"If any of you want any further proof," said he, "I will take you to a place north of here, where I have been hanging around when you missed me, and they will tell you that I was there when Steve thought he met me."

"We don't doubt that she will say that," replied Casterfield. "Who is she, Joe?"

"You can see her if you will go up there with me. I would like to have you go, Simon, and I can introduce you as a man who is going in with me to develop this tract and stock it. There is a fine lay-out of cattle on that place."

"We are all satisfied, Joe, and I don't want to mix in any of your women scrapes. When you get the cattle business down fine, let us know."

"Oh, we will get the cattle, and I will get the girl. There is one thing you can help me in, boys, if you will."

"Want us to run her off for you?" inquired Casterfield.

"Nothing of the kind. You know the old log house where the saw-mill was. It is a stout and solid house yet, though rather out of repair, and I want some furniture for it."

"Going to set up housekeeping?"

"Never mind what I am going to do. I know where I can get the stuff I want, just as easy as rolling off a log, and all I want is a little help. I will pay for it, too—that is, for the

help. You may divide among you my share of the Texas cattle."

"Where is the place?" asked Steve Lowry.

"You know John Heffron's—not much of a place, but fairly well fixed. His wife died lately, leaving him all alone, except for a couple of niggers, and he has got disgusted with the country, and has packed up his things to move away. We will find everything handy there—team and all—and it will be the easiest kind of a job. You can have the cattle and the niggers, and I will take the furniture, and we will clean him out."

It was agreed that the scheme was a good one, and that Musgrove should have the assistance he asked for to enable him to set up housekeeping on the Grosse Tete tract.

"And if you want the old house fixed up, Joe," said Matt Burns, "I will be glad to do the job for you. I'm a good hand at that sort o' thing."

John Heffron's place, as Musgrove had said, was not much of a place, and he was not much of a farmer.

But he had a little, and that little he had prepared to take away, with the view of emigrating from the country where he had lost his wife, and where he had scarcely made a living.

He had sold his land, and the greater part of his belongings were already packed in his farm-wagon, which was to receive the small remainder at an early hour in the morning.

The horses that were to draw the wagon were in his little stable near by, and his two "niggers," who represented more value than all the rest of his property put together, were wrapped in slumber in the cabin where he slept.

But John Heffron was never to see the next morning.

The direction in which he was to emigrate was one that he had not calculated on.

Near the hour of midnight he was awakened by a hail outside.

It was a friendly hail, and he went to the door and opened it.

Hardly was he visible there in the starlight, looking with half-opened eyes for the person who had hailed him, when the sharp report of a rifle closed his eyes forever.

A bullet tore through his brain, and he fell dead.

"Gone to join his wife," said Simon Casterfield, with a harsh and cruel laugh.

The two negroes, aroused by the shot, if not by the hail, were more startled than scared.

Though they knew that there was murder about, they were not afraid of being killed, as they were too valuable to be shot.

Slavery had that consolation for them, at least.

They were captured and secured without any difficulty, and the marauders proceeded to "clean out" John Heffron's establishment.

As Musgrove insisted that its late proprietor should be put under the ground, the "niggers" were set at work to bury him and to efface the marks of the murder.

Then a clean sweep was made of the personal property, the outlaws piling into the wagon an assortment of stuff for which they had no use, to make it appear that Heffron had carried out his intention of moving away.

Before daylight the loaded wagon was at the old house by the saw-mill site, the cattle and horses were corraled on the tract until they could be run off into Texas and sold, and the two negroes were confined at "the old place" for the purpose of a similar extradition.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RYAN'S FORK RANGERS.

FLUSH FRED's next adventure with which his double was concerned was a peculiar and unpleasant one.

It might have been expected, after Kate Henning's adventure on her arrival in that region, that something of the kind would occur; but Fred had become reckless, and it is always the unexpected that happens.

The old saying that the pitcher that goes often to the well is sure to be broken at last, was disagreeably exemplified in his person.

His wife had relaxed her vigilance, as wives are likely to do when their husbands have passed unscathed through expected dangers, and Fred was allowed to roam about pretty much as he pleased without serious objection on her part.

Availing himself of this privilege, he set out one morning to make a visit to Charley Wynne's place, which he had not yet seen.

Charley had become quite a favorite of his, and had, for his part, taken a great fancy to Fred Henning.

Fred did not go alone, but was accompanied by one of Major Chappelle's negro men, not as a guard, but as a guide.

He had a pleasant time at Wynne-or-lose, finding there such a repast and such wines and liquors as he would never have expected to discover in that portion of the country.

With Charley he enjoyed a "quiet game," looked over his blooded stock, and generally en-

joyed the quaint but bright ways of that young gentleman.

Time passed so rapidly there, that it was well on toward "the shank of the evening" when he started to return—a later hour than he had fixed upon, out of regard for the anxiety of Kate.

But he hoped that by riding fast he would be able to reach Rose Lawn before the night had fairly set in.

He made good time at the start, and would undoubtedly have fulfilled his expectations if something unexpected had not occurred.

It happened that a party of Ryan's Fork men were out that day, and that they were looking for him.

That is to say, they were looking for Joe Musgrove, whose appearance in the vicinity had been reported to them by a cattle man who caught sight of him.

The male residents of Ryan's Fork, it should be stated, in view of various depredations and disturbances of the peace in and about their village, had formed themselves into an organization which they styled the Ryan's Fork Rangers.

Its object was the detection and punishment of thieves and other lawless persons, and especially the apprehension and execution of the scoundrel who had once so narrowly escaped lynching at their hands.

When they found him out there, riding across the plain with one negro man, they marked him for their prey, and there was great rejoicing among the Ryan's Fork Rangers.

But it was necessary to use strategy, as the criminal was known to be a daring man, skillful in the use of weapons, and possessed of all the elements and resources of audacity.

It was not their object to kill him, or to run the risk of being killed by him, but to take him alive and reserve him for the rope.

Therefore they must not attack him openly, but inveigle and surround him, so that all the advantage might be on their side.

The size of the party, composed of ten well-armed men, was sufficient for that purpose, provided that he should not take the alarm too easily.

Among them was the large and portly man to whom Kate Henning had appealed at Ryan's Fork, whose name was Riggins, and who, being a justice of the peace, was known as "Judge" Riggins.

Though he was nominally the leader of the party, he did not put himself forward on this occasion, supposing that his person would be too well known to the villain they were pursuing, but delegated the leadership to Jesse Gormley, the stalwart blacksmith of Ryan's Fork.

Jesse Gormley planned the campaign carefully.

His party had started to cross the plain nearly at right angles to the course that Fred Henning was pursuing, and he caused them to make a little detour, so that they met and confronted him.

Their plan then was to allay any possible suspicion on his part, to join him amicably, and to hold him in friendly converse, until they should have him fully in their power.

Greatly to the surprise of some of them, Fred Henning was as amiable as they were, expressing no surprise at their presence there, and evidently feeling no apprehension with regard to their intention.

Of course they were sure that he must have recognized more than one of them; but he was regarded as a very shrewd and wary rascal, and his apparent unconsciousness only caused them to keep a closer watch upon him.

The blacksmith informed him—Judge Riggins keeping in the background—that they had been hunting stray cattle, but had not succeeded in finding them.

"You seem to be a stranger in these parts," he continued. "What might your name be?"

"My name is Henning," replied that gentleman.

"Seems like I've seen you or heard of you somewhar. Whar might you be going to, Mr. Henning?"

"I am going to Rose Lawn, Major Chappelle's place, where I am stopping."

"Not now, Mr. Henning. You are going with us."

This was the signal that had been agreed upon, and the next instant Flush Fred was covered by the rifles and revolvers of the men who had already surrounded him.

What could be the meaning of this attack? Had the Grosse Tete squatters caught him?

He only knew that he was hemmed in—captured without a chance to defend himself.

But he was not the sort of man who would yield without a struggle, and he reached for his revolver.

Gormley and another, who had edged close up to him, seized him from each side, and a third man grasped his bridle-rein.

In a moment he was disarmed and completely in their power.

The negro man who accompanied him had discreetly dropped behind when the "white folks" came up.

When the attack was made upon Flush Fred, he turned quickly, whipped up his horse, and galloped back toward Wynne-or-lose.

He was so well mounted, and so thoroughly scared, that when his flight was discovered he was already disappearing in the distance.

"Stop that nigger! Shoot him!" yelled the Ryan's Fork Rangers.

An ineffectual shot was sent after him, and ten of the best mounted men started in pursuit; but the darkey made such good speed that they were forced to give up the chase.

He did not slacken the rein or spare the whip until the nearly exhausted horse dashed up to Charley Wynne's house, startling the young proprietor, who was smoking his cigar at the front door.

"What's the matter?" demanded Charley. "Where is Mr. Henning?"

As soon as he could get breath, the man told the story of Fred's capture.

Charley Wynne was all energy and action.

He threw away his cigar, dashed to the stable, and hastily saddled his best horse without waiting for the slow motions of his followers.

His rifle and revolver were ready for him when he was mounted, and he took the direction from Fred's darkey, and was off like the wind.

Fred Henning in the mean time was soon made acquainted with the true state of affairs.

He was cool enough when his capture had been effected, and ready to look his fate in the face, whatever it might be.

"Who are you?" he demanded, "and what do you mean by this?"

"Come, now; that's a little too much," replied Jesse Gormley. "You have been takin' it mighty cool; but you needn't try to play off innocent on us. You know well enough who we are."

"If I have ever seen any of you before, I confess that I have forgotten it."

"Better confess the hull thing, so's you can swing off with a clear conscience."

"Perhaps you will say that you don't remember me," remarked Judge Riggins, who had come forward to resume the leadership of the party.

"I certainly do not remember you," answered Flush Fred.

"I must say, young man, that you are the coolest hand I ever met, by a large majority. For square, straight forward, brass-mounted lying you will take the cake over any man in these United States. So that we may all have a clear understanding of this business, I will recall a few points to your mind, though I am sure that you remember them fully as well as we do. I am Judge Riggins of Ryan's Fork, and these men are the Ryan's Fork Rangers. We have been hunting you for some time, and now that we have caught you we are going to finish up the job of hanging that we had begun when your wife chipped in and saved your neck."

The prisoner burst into a laugh.

He saw it all then, and felt greatly relieved.

The situation was bad enough, but not near as serious, in his view, as it would have been if his captors were the Grosse Tete squatters.

There was an exceedingly unpleasant complication; but he was sure of being able to prove his identity to the satisfaction of reasonable men.

"I ask your pardon for laughing, gentlemen," said he, "and there is really nothing funny for me in this business; but you have made a mistake. You have got the wrong man. You have taken me for my double. My wife told me about that affair, and I was heartily sorry that you were prevented from hanging that scoundrel when you had him."

"I shouldn't wonder if we were a durned sight more sorry than you were," replied Judge Riggins. "But we don't mean to be sorry that way again, as the hanging has got to come off this time."

Flush Fred perceived that his captors were thoroughly in earnest, fully intending to persist in their mistake.

What could he do to convince them of their error?

"I swear before God!" said he, "that I am telling you the exact truth."

"And I sw'ar to all eternity," exclaimed the blacksmith, "that I don't see how you can have the steel-tempered cheek to try to play that game on us ag'in. You made it work once; but we are everlastin'ly sartain that it's played out."

"We won't have any foolishness this time," said the leader of the Ryan's Fork Rangers. "If we should let ourselves be fooled again, every one of us ought to be strung up. Where is the rope, boys?"

"Give me a chance!" pleaded the prisoner. "I can explain all this to your satisfaction. It is a long story, but a true one. My friends are some of the best people in Calcasien. Send for them, or take me to them, and I will prove that you have made a mistake."

"Oh, that's the same gag. Do you take us for a set of idiots, to think that you can swindle us with that again? We waited once before, and let you send for those friends of yours, and who were they, and what did they do? They

were a gang of the worst scoundrels in the parish, who came into town in the dead of night, drove away the men who were guarding you, and carried you off. We have had enough of that. Come, boys; let us hunt a tree."

CHAPTER XXVI.

CHARLEY WYNNE'S ELOQUENCE.

It was easy enough to find a tree.

All the lynchers had to do was to cross the open to the timber and pick out one that suited them.

For Flush Fred the prospect was decidedly blue, and there can be no doubt that he inwardly execrated his unfortunate resemblance to Joe Musgrove, with all the tricks and ways of his villainous double.

But what was he to do?

Nothing could be clearer than the fact that the Ryan's Fork Rangers would not listen to anything he said; that their minds were made up; that they would only laugh at any story he might tell; that they intended to hang him then and there, and get him off their hands.

Such was undoubtedly their intention, and they proceeded to carry it into execution with neatness and dispatch.

A tree was soon selected, and a rope was properly knotted.

Fred Henning's horse, on which he sat with his arms bound behind his back, was led under the tree, and he could only wish that his troublesome double was in his place.

The blacksmith made a suggestion that caused a little delay.

"We had better be on the watch, boys," said he. "That nigger who scampered off has gone to tell his friends, and they may come up on us afore we know it."

"No fear o' that," answered another. "'Twas the Sarpint Bayou gang that roughed in an' stole him off the last time. The nigger didn't go thar way, and he couldn't bring them up in time, anyhow."

"That's so," joined in Judge Riggins. "We are enough to take care of any crowd that might come, and all we've got to do is to be quick about our work and make a sure thing of it."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Gormley. "I hear hosses—comin' at a tearin' rate, too."

The others listened, and easily heard the galloping.

They held their weapons in readiness, and put themselves in positions of defense.

The galloping came nearer very rapidly; but it was soon evident that there was no element of danger in it.

"It's only one boss," said Gormley in a disappointed tone, as if he was disgusted at the prospect of missing a fight.

Immediately the horseman came into view, emerging from the timber above, and riding straight down through the open at a headlong gallop.

He was splendidly mounted, and sat his horse as if he were part of him, urging him to his utmost speed.

Flush Fred's face lighted up as he recognized Charley Wynne, who had of course come to his aid.

But what could one man do?

Charley's horse came on with great strides never slackening his tremendous pace until he reached the camp.

Then he was suddenly halted, and stood there panting and perspiring, all a-tremble with the exertion and excitement of his mad race.

"What do you mean, my friends?" demanded Charley as soon as he could find breath to speak. "What are you doing to my friend Henning?"

"Use your eyes, and you will see," coolly answered Judge Riggins. "We are going to hang your friend Henning."

"You were going to make a great mistake, and it is lucky that I got here in time to prevent you from committing a terrible crime."

"You had better go easy, young man, and pick your words a little more carefully. We know what we are doing."

"You have got the wrong man," insisted Charley. "I know what you mean. You are Ryan's Fork men, and you have taken Mr. Henning for the scoundrel who murdered a man and got loose when you wanted to hang him."

"That is just what we have taken him for, and we know him to be the man we want, and we are not going to be fooled any more."

"Listen to me, my friends. I am Charley Wynne, a man of property here, and well thought of by all who know me. You know me, Judge Riggins. I sold you the horse you are riding, and you must admit that you got a good bargain. There are other men here whom I have met at Ryan's Fork and done business with. Do any of you believe that I would lie to you, or that I would have any interest in telling you an untruth about this gentleman? I am well acquainted with him, and know that he is not the man you take him for. He has a double."

"Thar it goes ag'in!" exclaimed Jesse Gormley. "Jest what he's been tryin' to stuff into

us, himself. That game has been worked off on us once, and it won't do any more."

"But I am telling you the truth."

"Jest what he said. How long have you knowed him?"

"Not long; but I am certain of what I say. He is from Concordia parish, where he owns a fine plantation. He is an intimate friend of Major Chappelle's, at whose house he is stopping with his wife and child."

"We've seen his wife," muttered Gormley.

"We know enough about her."

Flush Fred flared up.

"What's that?" he angrily demanded. "Don't dare to say anything disrespectful of my wife. If my hands were loose, I would teach you better manners."

"You had better save your breath," replied the blacksmith. "You hain't got any to spare."

"I wish you would listen to me quietly," said Charley Wynne, "and without saying anything that will make this mess worse than it is. This gentleman, as I was going to tell you, came from Major Chappelle's this morning, with one of the major's niggers as a guide, to my place. He took dinner with me, and spent several hours there, and was on his way home when he met you."

"Just so," interposed Judge Riggins. "He met us, and we took him in, and are glad we've got him. Now, Mr. Charley Wynne, I don't know much about you, but judge you to be the right sort of a man, and I reckon that you and some others have been badly fooled—just as we don't mean to be again. This man Henning must really be one of the smartest rascals unhung. Have you ever played cards with him?"

"We had a few games to-day."

"Plays a right sharp game; don't he?"

"As good a game as any man I ever met."

"Quick and close with his pistol, too?"

"He is very handy with the revolver and the rifle."

"That's our man. And his name is Fred Henning, and all that you have told us we have heard before, here and at the Fork, and we don't take a picayune's worth of stock in any of the yarns he tells about himself. Did you ever see the double he speaks of?"

"No."

"I thought so. You were fooled with the rest, I suppose."

"But there are those who have seen him—men, and women, too, who cannot easily be fooled, and whose words you are bound to believe. Major Chappelle has seen him and has been swindled by him, and he fought a duel with Mr. Henning on that account, believing him to be the same man. Major Chappelle's family saw him, and were ready to turn this gentleman out of the house when he came to visit them with the major. Mrs. Henning has seen him, and was fooled by him into stopping a lawsuit which this gentleman had begun in connection with Major Chappelle. He has been seen by Hark Sanders, who knows who he is and where he lives, and who mistook Mr. Henning for him. All those people have been convinced of their mistake, and are now his friends."

Charley Wynne's arguments had the eloquence of earnestness, and were so evidently sincere that they could not fail to have weight, even with the hard-headed Rangers of Ryan's Fork.

As he piled fact upon fact and name upon name, he could see that his hearers were weakening.

But they did not show any real signs of yielding until he mentioned the name of Hark Sanders.

The hunter was not only well known to them, but they believed him to be a man of unusual sagacity and absolute truthfulness.

There could be no doubt that his word would go for more with them than the statements of the wealthiest and best people in the parish.

"Are you sart'in that Hark Sanders will back you up in that?" inquired Gormley.

"I am, and so will the others I have named. And that is not all. Major Chappelle's family will prove to your satisfaction that when you were about to hang that scoundrel, this gentleman was far from Ryan's Fork, at Rose Lawn, Major Chappelle's place."

"I reckon, judge," said the blacksmith, "that we had better wait and kinder look into this thing. If we should happen to hang the wrong man, it would be wuss'n hangin' nobody."

"You are right there, Jesse. If the rest of the Rangers are agreeable, we will take him on to the Fork, and give Mr. Wynne a chance to prove what he has said. But it has got to be proved solid, and the man mustn't get away from us this time."

The others agreed with the opinion of their leaders, and the party set out for Ryan's Fork.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SETTLING THE QUESTION.

THE Rev. Josiah Silsbee was a young Episcopal clergyman who had entered the clerical profession from the purest of motives, and with high ideas of doing all the good he might.

With this object in view he had renounced much that would have been pleasant and profitable to him.

Being young, handsome, well-educated and fairly eloquent, he might easily have secured popularity, preferment, and a good position.

But he had left a flourishing church in a well-settled and wealthy part of Louisiana, to devote himself to mission work in the sparsely-settled and much poorer southwestern portion of the State.

If he had not made a remarkable success in securing converts and building up churches, he had at least gained an extensive popularity, and his earnestness and sincerity had endeared him to all sorts and conditions of people.

Night had settled down upon the village when the Ryan's Fork Rangers returned with their prisoner, and most of the peaceful inhabitants were snug in their beds.

But several who were not pacifically inclined were sitting up at the Cacajou saloon, firing their blood with strong liquors, and speculating upon the pleasure of hanging the man who murdered Bill Stump.

These ardent patriots greeted the arrival of the party with cheers and yells, and thus the news of the capture was quickly spread through the village.

Such an exciting event speedily brought forth the old and the young, until almost the entire population were clustered about the returned Rangers and their prisoner.

Much surprise and displeasure was manifested when it became known that the hanging was not to come off immediately, but had been indefinitely delayed for the purpose of allowing the prisoner to bring forward proof that he was not the man he was supposed to be.

Those who most vehemently opposed this determination, and insisted upon a summary execution, were the men who had been firing their blood at the Cacajou.

It is always the warriors who stay at home who are the most eager for the massacre of the captives.

"It is the same game again," was the burden of their indignant complaint.

"You are going to let yourselves be fooled once more with that stale trick, and the Serpent Bayou gang will come up and take the town this time.

"But if you fancy that we, the citizens of Ryan's Fork, are going to stand any more of that sort of thing, and submit to being cheated out of a hanging, you are mistaken in us."

The sturdy Rangers, who had borne the labor and peril of the expedition, stood up for their own side, and were fully as obstinate as anybody.

"You talk like a set of fools," Judge Riggins declared. "If we had not been pretty well convinced that there is a solid doubt whether this is the man we want, you lazy cusses would never have seen hide or hair of him, as we would have strung him up to the nearest tree. We are the men who caught him, while you were soaking your skins at the Cacajou, and we claim the right to decide what shall be done with him. We know what we are about, too, and don't you forget it. If you are afraid that the Serpent Bayou crowd may come and take the town, you had better get your guns and prepare to meet them."

This speech, which was not at all conciliatory in its tone, only had the effect of further inflaming the passions of the stay-at-home patriots, and it is probable that a collision would have occurred, if the Rev. Josiah Silsbee had not appeared upon the scene.

That gentleman was sleeping at the tavern when the Rangers returned, but was speedily aroused and brought out by the noise and excitement.

His presence had a quieting influence upon the crowd; but something new was quickly brought out that increased the interest of the occasion.

He advanced to the prisoner, holding out his hand, with a glad smile of recognition; but his face fell when he perceived that the man he recognized was the one about whom the excitement centered.

"Why, Mr. Henning!" he exclaimed. "Can it be you that is in this scrape?"

"It is I, Mr. Silsbee, as you see," replied Fred. "Our friends here have made a mistake which has not missed much of costing me my life. They were near hanging me a while ago, but were finally persuaded to wait and make sure that I was the man they wanted."

Mr. Silsbee's recognition had excited the surprise of the Rangers, and Judge Riggins stepped forward to interrogate him.

"Do you know this man, Mr. Silsbee?"

"I should say that I do, and I am proud to know him. I had the honor and pleasure of marrying him to one of the nicest young women I ever met."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Fred Henning, of Gravelly Bayou, near Martigny, Concordia parish."

"Are you sure that he is the man you know? He claims that he has a double—that there is another man who is his exact image."

"Of course he is the man. He recognized

me, and called me by name. That ought to be enough. But I can easily satisfy myself, beyond a shadow of a doubt, by asking him a few questions about people and things at his home."

Mr. Silsbee questioned the prisoner, whose answers he found entirely satisfactory.

"This is the Fred Henning I know," said the clergyman. "There is not a bit of doubt of that. He is a man of property, a gentleman, and in all respects honorable and responsible."

"But that does not prove, Mr. Silsbee, that he ain't the man who murdered Bill Stump, and stole Buck Bingley's horse."

"I can only say, Judge Riggins, that he is not the sort of man who would commit a murder, much less steal a horse."

"You see how it is, folks," said the leader of the Rangers, addressing the crowd. "Here is another man who is acquainted with him—a man we all know and like. I don't know whose word ought to go further with us than his, unless it should be Hark Sanders's, who is also said to know the man. But that ain't a patch in't to the queer stories that have been told us, and the proof that is promised us. This gentleman, Mr. Wynne, whom some of us know, says that Major Chappelle's folks will prove that this Mr. Henning was far from here when we started in to hang that rascal. So, you say there is only one thing for us to do. We must hold our prisoner—and we mean to keep him safe—until this question can be settled to the satisfaction of everybody."

The Rangers, with the consent of the crowd, took Flush Fred to a room in the tavern, where five of them sat up with him and watched him, while the others, aided by the citizens generally, guarded the building on the outside.

In fact, the community of Ryan's Fork was strictly under martial law during the remainder of the night.

Charley Wynne and Mr. Silsbee, who remained in the village to make sure that no unfair advantage should be taken of their friend, did for him all that could be done.

A man who knew Major Chappelle, and was thoroughly acquainted with the country, was mounted on Charley Chappelle's blooded horse and posted off to Rose Lawn to bring up the evidence that was required, Charley especially instructing him not to miss Hark Sanders.

But the people at Rose Lawn had already been stirred up.

When Fred Henning had not returned at the time at which he was expected, or for nearly two hours after that time, his wife was in a state of excitement and anxiety that infected all the rest of the household.

She insisted that he had been waylaid on the route, or had been overtaken by some dreadful disaster, and all suggestions that he might have overstayed his time at Wynne-or-lose were indignantly scouted by her.

He was not that kind of a man, she said. No considerations of personal pleasure or convenience would prevent him from returning to her—and the baby—as he promised.

She declared that he was either dead or in great danger, and that Major Chappelle was no friend of hers or of Fred's unless he should immediately make an energetic effort to discover what had become of him.

The planter did not need such an appeal to induce him to do for his friend all that lay in his power.

He was sufficiently worried on his own account to obey Kate's wishes at once.

Hark Sanders, who had been an inmate of the house since his engagement by the owner of the Grosse Tete tract, was naturally selected to conduct the search.

Frank Chappelle volunteered to accompany him, and the major declared his intention of making a third member of the party.

Kate Henning was anxious to go with them; but her petition to that effect met a positive and point-blank refusal.

The party of three set out, well mounted and armed, followed by the prayers of Fred Henning's anxious wife and friends.

The best course for them to pursue was obviously to follow the route that Fred must have taken, as far as Charley Wynne's.

If they should see no sign of him on the way, they might hope to get some information at Wynne-or-lose.

But they had not traveled far when they met the negro man who had gone with Fred as his guide.

As soon as he had started off Charley Wynne, he had set out to return to Rose Lawn, to inform the people there of what had befallen their friend.

He quickly confirmed the fears of Major Chappelle and his party, by relating the capture of Fred.

The question then arose, who and what were the men who had captured him?

The planter was at first inclined, as Fred had been, to settle upon the Grosse Tete gang as the authors of the outrage.

But Hark Sanders struck the right solution.

"'Twasn't Joe Musgrove's gang," said he. "Thar was too many of 'em fur that. I'm keen to bet that 'twas some of the Ryan's Fork folks,

who happened to come across him an' gobbled him up fur the man they wanted to hang. What we'd best do is to strike right out fur Ryan's Fork, an' get thar as soon as we ken."

"That's it," agreed the planter, "and I am afraid that it is a dangerous business for poor Fred. It is a good thing to know that Charley Wynne is ahead of us; but we must not count much on that."

The negro man, after having been specially instructed as to what he should say, was sent on to Rose Lawn, and Hark Sanders led the party by the nearest route toward Ryan's Fork.

They were yet at a considerable distance from that village, when they met Charley Wynne's messenger, mounted on that gentleman's horse.

He informed them of Flush Fred's safety thus far, and speedily put them in possession of the condition of affairs at the Fork.

He gladly accompanied them back to the village, which they reached as day was breaking.

Then there was a renewal of the excitement at Ryan's Fork.

Those of the inhabitants who had crawled into bed tumbled out hastily, and ran to observe the *denouement* of the strange affair.

As the settlement of the question was to be made to the satisfaction of everybody, Flush Fred was brought forth into the streets, where he gladly greeted his friends from Rose Lawn.

Major Chappelle and Frank made their statements, confirming all that Charley Wynne had told the Rangers, and conclusively proving that Fred Henning was with them when his double was at Ryan's Fork.

This was highly satisfactory; but there was other evidence that the crowd wanted.

They insisted upon hearing from Hark Sanders.

He added his testimony to that of the others, declaring that he knew both the doubles, and that Fred Henning, the gentleman, was not Joe Musgrove, the rascal.

"Are you dead sure of that, Hark?" was the general query.

"Wait a minute, till I ax him a few questions about things that nobody knows but us two."

Hark asked the questions, which were duly answered, and he pronounced himself "dead sure."

The question was settled, and Flush Fred was released.

Charley Wynne invited the crowd to moisten their clay in the tavern at his expense, and Major Chappelle made a little speech, in which he declared that within a week he and his friends would bring Joe Musgrove to Ryan's Fork, dead or alive.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SNAKE IN A DOVE'S NEST.

JOE MUSGROVE'S absences, through one of which disaster had befallen his partners in their Huntoon expedition, were very pleasurable to himself, as his time was mostly spent at Daniel Maybury's hospitable home.

There was at least one other person there to whom his visits were a pleasure, and that was Sue Maybury.

She had fallen violently in love with the handsome young scoundrel, or with the romantic image which she had created to stand in the shoes of Fred Henning.

It is true that the actual Joe Musgrove did not come up to the standard of the ideal Fred Henning, as daily intercourse caused him to develop unconscious points of character that were anything but admirable.

But she loved him, and he knew it.

Perceiving that he had what he called a "soft thing," he had taken an early opportunity of declaring to her his intense and eternal affection, and she had freely and fully returned it.

So proud and happy was Sue, that she lost no time in communicating this brilliant fact to her relatives.

She perceived with sorrow that her sedate sister was none too well pleased with her accepted suitor.

It was a fine thing to be a handsome and wealthy young widower; but Mary could not bring herself to like the man.

She was sure that his moral character was not what it ought to be, and his reckless air, combined with a too intimate knowledge, of the wicked ways of the world, sometimes shocked her, and always prevented her from respecting him.

It was with sadness that Sue noticed this feeling arise and grow, but her sister's arguments and insinuations had an opposite effect to that which was intended.

She believed that Mary was envious of her handsome lover and her brilliant prospects.

"I don't suppose, Mamie dear," she said, "that Fred will make the steady-going and plodding sort of a husband that you expect Ben to be, but what a handsome and dashing fellow he is! And he is wealthy, and will give me a splendid home."

"I hope and pray that you may be happy with him, my-dear," answered Mary; "but I

must confess that there is something about him that makes me tremble for your future."

Ben Maybury naturally agreed with his affianced, but his father strongly took the side of Sue and her lover.

It was a big thing, as he expressed it, for his niece to be sought in marriage by a man of wealth and position, and she was fond of him, and the chances were, in his opinion, such as any girl might be proud of.

Besides, he had taken pains to make inquiries about Sue's suitor, and was satisfied that he was exactly such as he had represented himself to be.

Uncle Daniel had met a friend who had lately returned from Lake Charles, having gone down there to attend to some legal business, and whom he had commissioned to quietly inquire there concerning a gentleman named Fred Henning, who was stopping at Major Chappelle's.

His friend, James Albright by name, had happened to mention the subject to Judge Arnoux, the lawyer employed by the joint owners of the Grosse Tete property.

That gentleman, who was a great admirer of Flush Fred's, had highly praised the Fred Henning concerning whom he supposed the inquiries to be made, and had fully confirmed most of the statements that Joe Musgrove had put forth about him.

Mr. Henning, he said, was a man of large property, entirely honorable and responsible, and a gentleman whose acquaintance he was proud to own.

It happened that Judge Arnoux, in his brief statements, had no occasion to mention Fred Henning's wife or his double.

This was the weak point in the testimony that was presented to Daniel Maybury.

When Jim Albright returned and reported to the farmer, the latter did not attempt to conceal his delight.

"I didn't have the least doubt," said he, "that the gentleman was just what he represented himself to be; but it is well to be certain on those points, as he was a stranger to us, and we had nothing but his word and his looks to back up what he told us."

"Whatever Judge Arnoux says will always do to bet on," remarked Albright.

"That's so, Jim, and you have done me a great favor in speaking to him. I have some cattle business with Mr. Henning, and he is at my place a great deal; and, between you and me, Jim, he is mighty sweet on one of my nieces."

Good uncle Daniel hastened home, and poured this cheering news into the bosom of his family.

Sue was elated, though not surprised, and Mary was compelled to admit that everything looked fair on the surface, though she could not overcome her prejudice against her sister's suitor.

The cattle business of which uncle Daniel had spoken did not progress rapidly.

There was plenty of talk about it, and cattle were selected, and prices were discussed; but there was something that prevented the consummation of the bargain.

The false Fred Henning said that he would be obliged to wait until he had completed his arrangements for ousting the squatters from the Grosse Tete tract.

In the mean time he was not altogether certain of the shape that his plan would take.

Of those plans he talked very largely, and, as it seemed to Mary Maybury, rather wildly.

He had fallen in love with the Grosse Tete property, he said, and his engagement to Sue had made a change in his ideas with regard to his future life.

Just then he was strongly inclined to sell his ancestral home, and to settle in that part of the country.

The old-timers of Concordia parish, he said, were too stiff and straight-laced to suit him, and he was tired of their high-and-mighty style.

Therefore he was disposed to buy Major Chappelle's interest in the Grosse Tete tract, and to erect there a magnificent mansion, with splendid grounds and all the appurtenances of a great and grand plantation.

He wanted to be where he could feel free, and could have plenty of room, and could be the monarch of all he surveyed.

These expansive ideas were highly approved by uncle Daniel, and Mary was compelled to confess that it would be a great blessing to have her sister settled near her, while aunt Sarah was mightily pleased with that prospect.

As for Sue, though she had grand ideas of shining in older and more cultivated society than could be found in that region, she made no noise about them, but relied on her ability to shape things to suit herself.

Having paved the way for the final step that he intended to take, Joe Musgrove made a proposition to Sue that startled her at first, but did not fail to please her.

It was not really a startling proposition, though a little unusual, at least in that part of the country.

He proposed that she should go with him to visit Major Chappelle's family at Rose Lawn.

He was anxious, he said, to show her to his friends there, who were eager to see her, and would welcome her most cordially.

Mrs. Chappelle, he was sure, would be a mother to her, and she could not fail to enjoy a visit of a few days' duration.

In support of this proposition he showed a letter of invitation, purporting to have been written by Major Chappelle.

It was couched in the kindest terms, speaking highly of Fred Henning, expressing the desire of the major's family to become acquainted with Miss Maybury, and inviting her, on their part, to visit them at Rose Lawn and remain as long as she would.

This was quite satisfactory to uncle Daniel and aunt Sarah, and Sue saw no reason why she should not accept the kind invitation.

Mary thought that it would have looked better if the note had been written by Mrs. Chappelle, but found nothing else upon which to base an objection.

So it was settled that Sue should make a visit at Rose Lawn, and a question of clothing arose, as she expected to stay there a few days.

That question was satisfactorily arranged, with the assistance of Mary, and a big bundle was prepared, which Musgrove declared himself to be more than willing to carry, and his lack of false pride in the matter of bundles was duly appreciated by the family.

If they had seen him in his true light, they would have known that he was willing to carry away anything of value that he could lay his hands on.

He rode his own steed—surely his own, as he had stolen it in Rapides parish—and Sue was well mounted on one of uncle Daniel's best horses.

Thus they rode off together, a handsome and happy pair, followed by the good wishes and loving looks of those they had left behind.

It would have been a different scene if Sue Maybury and her friends had known whither and to what she was riding.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"ARE YOU A MURDERER?"

THERE was no sort of misgiving in Sue Maybury's mind as she rode southward with Musgrove over broad and sunny plains and through shady stretches of forest.

It was the pleasantest ride she had ever known, as her companion beguiled the time by exerting his imagination to produce pictures of the wealth she would enjoy and the realm she would rule when she would become his wife.

Claude Melnotte depicting the fancied palace by the lake of Como, was hardly more eloquent than that young scoundrel as he lied to the innocent girl at his side.

He lied so ably that he almost believed his own lies.

He also told much more than he knew about the family at Rose Lawn, and the joy they would feel at beholding his promised bride.

Though his experience with Mrs. Chappelle had been far from flattering to himself, he painted her in high colors as a charming and hospitable woman.

The major he declared to be a "jolly old boy," and he was enthusiastic in his praise of Frank and Florence, especially the latter.

Indeed, as Florence Chappelle had theretofore taken his errant fancy captive, he spoke of her in such terms of admiration that Sue saw fit to put on airs of jealousy.

"If you admire Florence Chappelle so much," said she, "why did you not marry her, instead of going into the wilderness to find such a poor creature as I am?"

Musgrove made the answer which she must have expected, and in a manner that pleased her.

Then he proceeded to open a little further his programme for the expedition.

"We are near the edge of that piece of property of mine that is called Grosse Tete," said he. "It would take us only a little out of the way to pass through a portion of the tract."

Sue was not in a hurry to agree to this suggestion, as she wanted to get on to Rose Lawn; but he pressed the point.

"I have become very fond of Grosse Tete, you know, and I would be glad to show you the property, and to know how you feel when you ride over the ground that is soon to be your own. I would also like to point out to you the spot where I am thinking of building our house."

This moved the girl to consent, and he added another inducement.

"We would both be very hungry, Susie dear, before we could reach Rose Lawn. By going through a corner of the tract we will pass an old house that I have had fitted up for my overseer, and we can stop there and get a lunch and a bit of rest."

This settled the question, and Sue Maybury rode forward contentedly upon the dark and dangerous Grosse Tete tract, which her companion informed her was quite bright and safe for him.

"You must not expect to find anything fine or stylish in here," said he. "The house that I spoke of is only an old log cabin, near where

there used to be a saw-mill, and it is rough enough. But it will have to serve my overseer until we can get started here, and I suppose we will find it comfortable enough for a little rest."

They were deep in the densest and darkest part of the forest when they came in sight of the dilapidated log house which Musgrove had pictured as the abode of his overseer.

"I don't like this place," Sue complained, with a shudder. "It is so dark and gloomy here, and the air is so damp and heavy, that I am afraid to be here."

"There is nothing to be afraid of when I am here to protect you," cheerfully responded Musgrove. "We are right at the house, too, and there is Burns waiting to receive us."

It was, indeed, Matt Burns, of the League of Six, who had been posted by Musgrove in the part he was to play, and was prepared to play it.

"How are you, Burns?" was Musgrove's greeting as he rode up. "Is everything going on well?"

"All right, sir," was the ready answer of Matt, as he stared with open eyes at his leader's fair companion.

"You needn't stare at the lady so. That is not polite. Where are the hands?"

"Had their dinner, sir, and gone to work."

"Well, we will stop here to lunch. I suppose Dinah can give us something."

Musgrove dismounted, and assisted Sue to alight, and Matt Burns took charge of their horses.

"What has become of Dinah?" angrily demanded Musgrove as he stepped inside the house.

"She's gone up to the old place to git some aigs," answered Matt.

"Too bad that she can't be here when she is wanted. I wish you would run up there, Mr. Burns, and make her hurry back."

Matt Burns started off on his feigned errand, and Joe Musgrove ushered Sue Maybury into the old house.

The place was far from an inviting one in appearance.

Though the logs were still stout, and the building was solid enough, rottenness and dilapidation were everywhere visible, and the best efforts of Matt Burns had not made it decently habitable.

It was furnished not uncomfortably, though rudely, and the furniture was old and shabby.

Sue could not help showing her disgust in her look, though she said nothing, but quietly accepted the seat that was offered her.

"It is a cold reception that we get here," said Musgrove, forcing a smile; "but it will be all right when Dinah comes."

"I wish she would come quickly," responded Sue, who was looking at everything in the room as if she wanted to make an inventory of its contents.

"She will soon be here, my darling, and then we will have a good hot lunch."

"I really do not care for any lunch," she replied. "I am not a bit hungry, I assure you. Suppose we ride on to Rose Lawn."

The time had come for Musgrove to advance the next step on his programme, and he was prompt to take advantage of this opening.

"That would never do at all, said he. "I know that I am hungry, and of course you must be. We both need something to sustain us before we go any further. And, speaking of going further, a bright idea has struck me."

"What is it, Fred? I will be glad of anything bright, even if it is only an idea."

"Suppose, dearest, that we make a runaway match of this."

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded Sue, showing much surprise, and perhaps a little fear.

"Nothing shocking, I hope, my sweetest. You know that I am crazy to claim you as my wife. Of course we are to be married, and why not right away? Like all good deeds, especially those upon which two persons are agreed, the sooner it is done the better."

"But how could it be done?" she asked.

"Easy as rolling off a log. Instead of riding to Rose Lawn, we can go right on to Lake Charles, where we can get married in a jiffy, and give our friends a grand surprise."

"But why need we surprise them? There would be no wedding, and it would scarcely seem like getting married. It would shock my people, too, and I suppose it would shock everybody else. I really don't know what they would think of me."

"They would know that you were married, and that would be enough. As for my friends, everybody who knows me knows that I have odd and off-hand ways of doing things. Why not make an elopement of it, Susie dear? That is so out of the way and romantic that it is just the thing for us. It will be splendid to gallop to Lake Charles and get married, and then ride up to Rose Lawn and be introduced as my wife."

The proposition had attractions to Sue Maybury, and she might have been won to it if her eyes had not come to the rescue of her ears.

She had hardly listened to the last of her companion's remarks, so intently was she occupied in staring about the room.

"Why don't you answer me, darling?" demanded Musgrove. "Why do you look at things so curiously?"

Just then her eyes were fastened on an old-fashioned clock that stood on a mantle-shelf that Matt Burns had put up.

She was staring at it with wide-open eyes, compressed lips, and face from which all the color had fled.

"Why don't you speak to me?" again demanded Musgrove. "What on earth is the matter with you?"

She turned her white and scared face toward him, and spoke slowly and as if with an effort. "Where—did you—get this furniture?"

Musgrove laughed harshly.

"Is that what's the matter with you?" he replied. "I bought the stuff, of course. It is a poor lay-out, I admit; but I had not thought that there was anything remarkable about it."

"There is something very remarkable about it," said Sue. "I know this furniture."

"What do you know about it?"

"It had a familiar look to me as soon as I came in, and that is why I gazed at it so curiously. If it was what I supposed it to be, it was so strange that I should find it here. Then I saw that old clock, and I knew."

"But what did you know?"

"This furniture belonged to John Heffron, who was my aunt Sarah's cousin, and I have seen it at his house."

Musgrove again laughed harshly.

"What of that?" he replied, "I have no doubt that it was Heffron's, as I bought it from him."

"Did you buy it before he was dead—or after?"

This question drove the color from Joe Musgrove's face, and he was so agitated that some seconds passed before he could answer her.

"He was alive when he sold it to me, of course. I had not heard of his death. I supposed that he was in Texas, as he told me that he intended to go there."

"He never went to Texas. He was not allowed to get away from his farm. He was shot down at night in his own house. Blood was seen on the doorstep, though the murderers had tried to wash it out, and his body has since been found where they buried it."

"This is a great surprise to me," muttered Musgrove.

"I wish I could believe that it is a surprise to you. Whoever murdered him carried away his property, including his cattle and this furniture, and uncle Daniel said that the trail led down into the Grosse Tete tract. Mr. Henning, are you a murderer?"

CHAPTER XXX.

UNMASKED.

"Are you a murderer?"

That question, so logically led up to, and asked with such sincerity and evident pain, was sufficiently upsetting to an innocent man—doubly so to a guilty man.

Musgrove jumped up, his face flaming with indignation, which was genuine, if not of the righteous kind.

"What's that you say?" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to accuse me of having murdered a man to get this shabby lot of stuff?"

Sue Maybury had also risen to her feet, and was cool, if not cold—calm, but very pale.

"Get the horses, Mr. Henning," said she. "I wish to ride on to Rose Lawn. I cannot stay here any longer."

"But we have not had our lunch yet. You ought not to get excited about nothing."

"I cannot stay in this place any longer, I tell you. The sight of these things would drive me crazy. There is the very bed in which poor Jane Heffron died, and everything is stained with her husband's blood."

"Nothing of the kind. You are hysterical. You must not leave here until this matter is settled."

"What matter?"

"You have called me a murderer."

"Did I? I take it back, then. Only let us go."

"Not yet. You have not answered the question I asked you a while ago."

"What question?" she vacantly asked.

"Confound it! Has that nonsense about the furniture driven everything else out of your head? I asked you why we should not make a runaway match of this, and go down to Lake Charles and get married?"

"I am not thinking of that. I only want to get away from this place. I should never have come here. I must go. I will go. If you do not wish to accompany me, I will go alone. Stand aside, sir, and let me pass out."

Instead of moving out of her way, Musgrove closed the door, on which Matt Burns had put a heavy lock, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

"You shall not leave here," he said, "until this business is settled. You have got a wild, crazy idea into your head, which I must try to get you rid of. You have accused me of being a murderer, and don't want to give me a chance to defend myself. You had better sit down, now, and listen to what I have to say."

The poor girl sat down, simply because she was so weakened by excitement and agitation that she could no longer stand.

She perceived that she was Musgrove's prisoner, and was forced to confess to herself that she was afraid of him.

Sue Maybury was prone to be governed by impulse, and her fear had sprung into existence as suddenly as her love.

Suspicion, once implanted in her breast, had grown so rapidly that she doubted all the statements he had made concerning himself and everything connected with him.

But she knew that she was in his power, and that she must endeavor to assume a composure which she did not feel, and to gain a strength which she did not have.

So she settled herself down, waiting for the return of Dinah, or the arrival of the overseer or the men who had gone to work.

She had yet to learn that Dinah was a creature of the imagination, that the workmen were myths, and that the overseer was but Musgrove's confederate in crime.

"You have as good as accused me of being a murderer," said Musgrove. "You say that you take it back; but that question must be settled. The idea that I would kill a man for this shabby lot of furniture is too absurd to talk about."

"Then we need not speak about it," quietly replied Sue.

"But I must speak of it. To think that I, a rich man, owning all this tract, and a big plantation in Concordia, with lots of niggers, should be accused of such a thing!"

"You told me that you bought these things from John Heffron in his lifetime, and I know that they were carried away by his murderers after his death."

"That's where the hitch is. When I said that I bought them, I didn't mean that I made the purchase myself. You can't suppose that I attend to these odds and ends of business. I told my overseer to get what he wanted, and he told me all that he had bought this stuff from John Heffron. I never asked him when or where or how he bought it, or what he had bought. I gave him money to pay the bill, and that is all I know about the matter. For all I know he may have bought it from a lot of thieves and murderers. I will ask him about it, and you may bet your sweet life that he will get a heavy raking over."

Sue Maybury made no answer.

The man talked plausibly, and his story was reasonable enough to pass muster.

But there was something in his manner—something that her sister had observed, though she had not noticed it until now—which increased her already aroused suspicion.

Yet, as he was then the arbiter of her fate, she must try to conciliate him—at least, until some other person should appear, to whom she could appeal.

"That is the long and the short of it," resumed Musgrove, "and you see what a tempest in a tea-pot you have raised. Is it not plain to you, now?"

"Plain enough," she answered. "Oh yes, it is quite plain, and I ask your pardon for having spoken so thoughtlessly. I was excited, you see, at finding these things here. Let us go now. Let us ride on to Rose Lawn."

"I will tell you what I am willing to do, Susie. If you will go down to Lake Charles with me, and marry me there, I will bring up the horses."

"I prefer to go to Major Chappelle's," she insisted. "Why do you object to making the visit that we set out to make?"

"I do not object to it; but I want to get married first. Will you go with me? If not, this door sha'n't open."

"I will," she answered. "I will go anywhere with you."

She might have added that she would go anywhere to get away from that house, as that was surely what she meant.

Musgrove's countenance showed pleasure at this restoration of confidence, and he was about to open the door, when the sound of voices outside caused him to stop, with a frown and a muttered oath.

The girl had already heard the voices, indistinctly and in the distance as they approached the house.

Doubtless the workmen were coming in—though it was early for that—and she could appeal to them for assistance, if it should be necessary to do so.

Musgrove knew better what the noises really meant, and that was what caused his frown and his muttered oath.

The truth was that Matt Burns had gone to "the old place" to enjoy the pleasure of giving his comrades the first information of the arrival of Joe Musgrove and his fair captive.

They were drinking heavily when he joined them, and the news he brought made them more hilarious as they drank to the prosperity of the "happy couple."

When Simon Casterfield proposed that they should go over to the mill-site and call on "Joe and his d xy," his half-drunken companions yelled in approval of the proposal.

Matt Burns, seeing what a storm he had un-

thinkingly raised, vainly endeavored to prevent it from bursting over the head of his friend.

They were bound to go, and go they did, full of drink and devilry.

Thus it was that when Joe Musgrove started to open the door, he recognized their voices, and poor Sue Maybury was soon convinced that there was no sort of assistance to be expected from that quarter.

"Hello, Joe!" yelled Casterfield. "Joe Musgrove! Open up, here, and be quick about it!"

"Who are you, and what do you want?" demanded Musgrove, who was covered with confusion and astounded at this unexpected interference with his plans.

"Oh, you know who we are. Don't give us any guff. Open out, here, before we knock the door down!"

There was no help for it, and Musgrove swallowed the dose with a wry face, debating how he should get rid of his unwelcome guests.

Sue Maybury sat there pale and silent, wondering who these people could be, and what they meant by calling for Joe Musgrove.

A few kicks at the door settled that part of the question, and Joe Musgrove sullenly turned the key in the lock, and stood there facing them.

"Go away, men!" he sternly ordered. "You have no business here. I am not in the humor to stand any foolishness."

Simon Casterfield and Steve Lowry roughly pushed him aside and entered, followed by Leon Mascada and Matt Burns.

"What's the matter with you, Joe?" demanded Lowry. "Don't you know that we've come to 'grashulate' you? We wanted to see the two turtle doves. Is that the gal? She's a sweetener, by ginger!"

Joe Musgrove could say nothing.

Though boiling over with indignation, he saw no way of giving it a vent, except by making matters worse than they were, if possible.

His four companions seated themselves on whatever they found handy, and stared at the poor girl with red eyes and whisky-inflamed faces.

She was so horrified and overwhelmed that she could not at once find speech, but stared blankly about.

Was it possible that anything could be worse than this?

At last she summoned strength to question the man who had brought her to that place.

"What does this mean?" she asked. "Who are these men, Mr. Henning? Why do they address you as Musgrove?"

"Thunder an' spikes!" exclaimed Casterfield.

"Hain't she dropped onto the facts yet, Joe? Jeeminy! You must have played it mighty fine."

Musgrove stood by the door with his arms folded, gazing at the group with a sneer that may be called diabolical.

"Go on," said he. "If there is anything worse that you can do or say, go ahead with it. I reckon the mess is about as bad as it can be."

"Come now, Joe," said Lowry. "Don't git your everlastin' back up. We don't want to sp'ile sport. On'y came to wish yer luck an' take a drink. Trot out some whisky, and we'll slope."

"Mr. Henning," said Sue, "I wish you to tell me why these men speak to you so familiarly and call you Joe."

"Oh, jeeminy!" yelled Casterfield. "That's too much. Come out, Joe, and make a clean breast of it. It's got to be done soon, anyhow, and you'd better have it over."

"You are right," replied Musgrove, "and you would be surprised to know how I thank you for your kindness. Miss Susie, my name is not Fred Henning, and I don't own this tract or any other. There is a man named Fred Henning, who has the misfortune to be my exact image, and I have been working that racket for some time. I am Joe Musgrove, the leader of this gang who worship the devil on the Grosse Tete tract. We killed John Heffron, to get his cattle and niggers and other stuff, and I have brought you here to set up house-keeping with his furniture, and I am a first-class romantic cuss—I am."

Sue Maybury did not hear the latter part of his statement, and probably had not comprehended much of it.

Her eyes glazed, and her chin dropped, as if in death.

Then she fell heavily from her chair to the floor.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FLUSH FRED'S OTHER WIFE.

AFTER Flush Fred's rough and perilous experience with the Ryan's Fork Rangers, his wife kept a more careful watch upon him.

She insisted that he should not again leave Rose Lawn alone, or go anywhere except in the company of Major Chappelle or Hark Sanders.

She was of the opinion that Charley Wynne and Frank Chappelle were not well enough known, and had not sufficient force of character, to properly protect her husband in case of dangerous or unpleasant complications, and she even had her doubts of the major.

But to Hark Sanders she pinned her faith as readily as the people of Ryan's Fork had done.

"It seems to me, Hark," observed the planter, "that you are just now the biggest man in the country, and that we will all have to knuckle under to you."

"I don't feel very big, major," replied the hunter.

"But the people at Ryan's Fork believed your word as soon as you spoke, when they would scarcely listen to any of the rest of us, even the clergyman."

"They knew me, you see, major, better than they knew any of the rest."

"And here is Mrs. Henning, who looks up to you and trusts you beyond any of the rest of us."

"She knows that t'other folks know me, major. That's all there is about that."

Fred was quite willing to keep within bounds until matters could be arranged so that he might lawfully go to work to clear out the Grosse Tete squatters and settle with his double.

His difficulty with the Ryan's Fork people had fully convinced him of the danger he ran in being mistaken for a man who was doubtless mixed up in many questionable exploits.

But, though he refrained from going to meet trouble, or from putting himself in the way of it, trouble came to him all the same.

It was near the close of day, and he happened to be seated alone on the veranda, when a vehicle came up the road, and halted at the foot of the lawn.

He could not see what sort of a vehicle it was, and he gave the matter no special attention.

But it was forced upon his notice a few minutes later, when a woman came up the walk that led to the house.

It was easy to see that this woman was neither young nor pretty nor well to do.

Her cheap apparel was covered with the dust of travel, and she carried a cotton umbrella and a rusty hand-bag.

In fact, she was quite an ordinary looking-person, and might be supposed to be a country woman, who had come to Rose Lawn for the purpose of seeking assistance.

But that was not what she was there for.

She walked direct to the veranda, stopped in front of Flush Fred, set down her hand-bag, and fixed upon him a pair of eyes in which the light of battle shone.

He was about to arise to address her when she opened her batteries.

"So I have found you at last," said she. "I reckon you allowed that I'd never come up with you; but you see that I was smart enough for that."

"What do you want, my good woman?" inquired Fred, wondering if her mind was out of gear.

"Your good woman! That's a purty way to talk to your own lawful-wedded wife, that you deserted so shamefully, and that has folloed and folloed you until she's found you at last. Next thing you'll be sayin' that you don't know who I am."

"I surely have not the pleasure of your acquaintance," he meekly replied.

"Oh, you brazen-faced villain! Oh, you black-hearted scoundrel! Liza was right when she said you had the gall-bustin'est cheek that was ever mounted on a man. I'd know you by that, if by nothin' else. And to think that I've come all this way to find you, and left little Jinnie with my sister, cryin' her eyes out for her pappy!"

This excitement naturally drew the Rose Lawn family to the veranda, as the woman's voice was loud and shrill, penetrating all parts of the house.

Kate Henning was the first to run out, followed by Mrs. Chappelle and Frank, and then by the major and Flo-ence.

"What is the matter here, Fred?" inquired the young wife. "Who is this woman?"

"One of my other wives, I believe," he replied, the humorous phase of the situation striking him the most forcibly at the moment.

"Just listen to him!" screamed the woman.

"One of his other wives! Gracious mercy! how many of 'em has he got by this time, I wonder?"

"Only one, I hope," pleasantly answered Kate.

"Lucky for him if it's only one, as I mean to put the law in force ag'inst him anyhow. I heerd you call him Fred, mum. Of course he's changed his name. I knew that. No tellin' how many times he's changed it. What name does he go by here, mum?"

"His name is Fred Henning."

"That's the last edition, I reckon—got the very latest news. Look here, mum. You're a sweet-lookin' young thing, and I'd be powerful sorry if you're on the wrong side of the fence. I hope you hain't gone and married him."

"I am free to confess that this gentleman is my husband," answered Kate.

"Oh, you poor, deceived creetur! I'm a heap sorrier for you now than I am for myself; honest, I am. Is there any children?"

Kate did not look a bit heartbroken by the deception as she cheerfully answered that they had a son a few months old.

"Gracious mercy! The poor, innocent child! Oh, that brazen-faced villain! Oh, that black-hearted scoundrel!"

Kate moved forward an easy-chair, and invited the woman to come up on the veranda.

"You look tired and hungry," said she. "Come here and sit down, and I will order some refreshments for you. While you are resting, we may get some light on this subject you speak of."

"There ain't no light, mum—it's all dark. Hangin' would be too good for that rascal. But I'm mortal sorry for you, and that's a fact."

She deposited her hand-bag and umbrella on the veranda, and accepted the seat that Kate offered her.

Refreshments were brought out, and it was from Kate's hands that she accepted cake and wine.

She glowered at Fred as she ate and drank; but the glances she cast upon Kate were full of respect and pity.

Fred's young wife, who did not look as if she felt the need of pity, seated herself near the stranger, with nothing of the air of a woman whose husband is claimed by another.

"I am sure," she said, "that we will be able to settle this business amicably."

"Oh! you can't buy me off," exclaimed the woman, bracing herself up. "No doubt you want to keep him. Everybody wanted him, and I reckon he'd never stick to nobody. But I want him, myself, rascal as he is!"

"I don't want to buy you off. I was going to suggest that there may be a mistake somewhere. You claim this gentleman as your husband, I believe."

"I should say I do, though I don't call him a gentleman. He allers wanted to git up among the big-bugs, and he's there now, I see. But gentlemen is as gentlemen does, to my notion. Yes, I do claim him as my husband—and why? Because I am his wife, and I am the first woman he ever married, too, no matter how many he's hitched to sence. We was married four years ago—Jinnie's more'n three now—in Noxubee county, Mississippi, by Parson Jimmison, and I've got the ce'tif'kit. He went off and left me quite two year ago, and I've been huntin' him ever sence, a good deal hendered by bein' short of money and the like. But I got on his trail at last, and tracked him by his photy-graph, and here it is."

She handed Kate a card portrait, in the worst style of the photographic art, but bearing still a striking resemblance to Fred Henning, even as he sat there.

"You must allow me to ask a question," said Fred's wife. "What is his name—that is, what was his name when he married you?"

"Muggridge, mum—Joe Muggridge. 'Twas his real name, too, because I knowed his people well."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Major Chappelle, whose face had suddenly turned red.

"What's the matter with the old gentleman?" inquired the stranger.

"I believe he is acquainted with your husband," answered Kate.

"That's what I allowed, as I find 'em here together."

"I am sorry to say, ma'am, that I am acquainted with your husband," remarked the major; "not this one, but the other one."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed the stranger; "what's the matter with the man? Does he mean to say that I've got two husbands?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE GIRL HE WAS SWEET ON.

FRED HENNING, who had been looking more and more annoyed and distressed as the interview advanced, then broke in for the first time.

"Come, Kate; better tell her how the matter really stands. You've got to tell her soon, and it is best to have it out and done with."

"Yes, my dear; but we should lead up to it gently, if we can. I fancy that the major is on the right track."

"I had no intention, ma'am," observed the planter, "of insinuating that you have two husbands. I was going to say that I know the Muggridge whom you mentioned to us. I ought to know him, by Jove! as he cheated me out of twenty thousand dollars."

"Twenty thousand dollars!" exclaimed Mrs. Muggridge. "Gracious mercy! And he never sent me a dollar of it. What a man! what a man! But he must have straightened the thing up, mister, as I see him settin' here with you quite friendly-like."

"This gentleman, ma'am, is not the man who swindled me. This is not Joe Muggridge, but Fred Henning."

"Come now, old gentleman, what are you givin' me? I know he has changed his name, but he can't change hisself."

"I believe the major is more clumsy than I am," remarked Kate. "Mrs. Muggridge, I will try to explain this matter to you. It has caused much trouble and sorrow, and I don't

know when we will come to the end of it. Major Chappelle has told you the exact truth. My husband, Fred Henning, whom you see sitting here, is not your husband, Joe Muggridge, whom you suppose him to be."

"Might as well say that I don't know my own husband," suggested the stranger.

"That is just the case, as it happens. Unfortunately for my husband, your husband resembles him so closely that they have frequently been mistaken for each other, and that has led to the trouble I speak of."

Mrs. Muggridge had no other answer to this than a look of utter incredulity.

"This seems strange to you, no doubt," continued Kate, "but it is none the less true. It has seemed strange to many other people who have been deceived by the resemblance, and we have had a great deal of trouble on that account. It was only the other day that my husband narrowly escaped being hanged for a murder that had been committed by your husband. It will not shock you, I hope, since he has deserted you for so long a time, to learn that he has gone from bad to worse, and that he is a notorious robber and murderer."

"I could easier believe that than the rest you tell me," replied Mrs. Muggridge.

"You shall be convinced of the truth of what I have told you, and much more than that."

"As it is a long story, Mrs. Muggridge," suggested the lady of the house, "perhaps you had better send away your vehicle and rest here for a while. We mean well by you, I assure you, and you will find plenty of sympathy among the rest of the victims here."

It was no easy matter to convince the poor woman that the intentions of the Rose Lawn people were kindly, and that they were not conspiring to keep her husband from her.

But she was finally so far persuaded on that point that she allowed herself to be made comfortable, and consented to listen to the long story.

It was told from the beginning, all those present taking part in the telling, and the proof was piled up until the deserted Mrs. Muggridge could not help believing.

As Fred Henning talked freely during the narration, a closer inspection of his tones and his manner aided in undeceiving her.

She finally admitted, with sighs and groans, that the fine looking gentleman before her was not her husband.

She was also forced to believe that her husband was in all respects a thorough-going scoundrel, but was not willing to admit that she would be better off without him.

He was hers, she declared, and she wanted him.

"There ain't no doubt, I reckon," said she, "that he is somewhere about here. How can I find him and git to him?"

"It is not at all likely," answered the major, "that you can find him if you try, and you will surely get into trouble if you try. Some of us are going to hunt him down, with the rest of the gang, and we will get hold of him before long."

"And what will become of him then?" she asked.

"Well, Mrs. Muggridge, you can't expect that he will come to any good. If you have any such idea, you will have to get rid of it. The people about here are so set against him that they will be sure to—"

"Hang him?"

"Just that, if they take him alive."

This was poor consolation for Mrs. Muggridge; but it was thought best to tell her the exact truth, and she was kindly cared for and left to meditate upon it.

The next day Flush Fred went to Lake Charles with Major Chappelle.

When they were at the office of Judge Arnoux, and after they had transacted the business that brought them there, they noticed that he was absorbed and preoccupied.

He evidently had something on his mind, and every now and then he glanced uneasily at Fred Henning, as if that gentleman was connected with the subject that was worrying him.

After a few hints, which Major Chappelle did not take, the lawyer requested the gentleman to withdraw, as he wished to have a few minutes' conversation with Mrs. Henning concerning a private matter.

"If it is a matter that concerns me alone," said Fred, "I hope that you will allow the major to remain. There is no affair of mine with which I am not more than willing that he should be acquainted."

The young gentleman insisted on this point, and his old friend was compelled to remain.

"It is a delicate matter," began Judge Arnoux, "and for that reason I had wished to speak to you about it privately, I know what men are, especially young men, and I don't suppose that you are much better than the majority."

"I don't pretend to be," answered Fred.

"What have I been doing now?"

"No harm, I hope. But, in respect of women, it is best to be careful and avoid serious complications, and—"

"Oh, out with it! You have got me excited now, judge, and I want to get hold of the complication as quickly as possible. It is something new, I hope, and not the affair of my other wife. We had that at Rose Lawn yesterday, and have got over with it."

"You take things so easily, Mr. Henning, that perhaps I may have worried myself too much about this business. What was the affair of your other wife?"

Fred gave an account of the visit of Mrs. Muggridge.

"This is not that affair," said the lawyer, "and I have just begun to fancy—but I should have thought of that sooner. The fact is, Mr. Henning, that awhile ago a client of mine from the country was in here, and in the course of the conversation he made some inquiries concerning you."

"As I supposed that his questions were merely prompted by curiosity, or perhaps by some little matter of business, I paid no special attention to them, and merely assured him that you were a gentleman of honor and responsibility."

"Yesterday he was here again, and again he mentioned you."

"He said that the inquiries of his previous visit had been made in the interest of a neighbor of his, who was very glad to learn that you were all right, as he expressed it, because he—the neighbor, you know—had some cattle business with you, and because—this is the point of the matter—you were mighty sweet on a niece of his."

"Oh, lordy!" exclaimed Flush Fred. "There it goes again!"

"I am afraid that this is worse than the Muggridge affair," remarked Major Chappelle.

"I suppose you both mean," suggested the judge, "that this is a matter with which that troublesome and diabolical double is mixed up. I ought to have thought of that sooner, and I wish I had."

"That is just it," answered Fred. "I have not been sweet on anybody's niece, unless my wife is better supplied with uncles than I had supposed her to be. That scoundrel of a Muggrove, or Muggridge, has been sailing under my name again, and there's no telling how much mischief has been done."

"The point will be, then, to ascertain how far the mischief has gone, and prevent it from going any further. Who is the man in whose behalf the inquiries were made?"

"Daniel Maybury is his name. I do not know just where he lives, but can find out."

"It is not necessary. Hark Sanders will know where to find him. Major, we must visit that man as soon as possible, and we must go in a body."

"Of course, Fred, you will not be allowed to go alone," replied the planter.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE STEEL OF THE TRUTH.

FLUSH FRED did not go to visit Daniel Maybury.

Events were working so as to bring the trouble home to him, instead of sending him to seek it.

Uncle Daniel was well pleased with Sue's engagement and with her supposed visit to Rose Lawn.

The only thing that troubled him was the state of mind in which it left Mary, who was evidently not pleased with the match, and was uneasy because of the absence of her sister.

Ben was infected with the same complaint, and aunt Sarah had touches of it too.

"It seems to me," said the former to Mary, "that you ought to be glad that your sister has done so well, instead of sulking and trying to put a cloud over things. It almost looks, my dear, as if you were jealous of her because of the fine match she has made—so much finer than yours. Ben is a good, steady, solid boy, though. He ain't rich, or what you might call brilliant; but he is a good sort."

"My dear uncle," protested Mary, "I assure you that I am not the least bit jealous of Sue—or envious, either. I am well satisfied with my own lot, and sincerely wish that her brightest anticipations may be realized. I must admit that I am not entirely easy about the affair; but my uneasiness is something that I cannot help."

"You should try to subdue it, my dear."

"I do, but cannot get rid of it. I know that Sue has romantic notions, not to say flighty ones, and Mr. Henning is so headstrong and so different from the rest of us."

"That is because he has plenty of money and can do as he pleases. After all, Mary, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and when you visit your sister in her own home, surrounded by all sorts of comforts and luxuries, you will rejoice with her. Between you and me, I would not be a bit surprised if she should come home from Major Chappelle's a married woman. Mr. Henning is headstrong, as you say, and it would be just like him, when he gets her among his friends, to insist upon marrying her off-hand."

"That is just what makes me afraid of him," replied Mary. "He is not only headstrong, but is too—too uncertain. You never know

where to find him, or what he is going to do. That is what makes me afraid of him."

"You can't expect everybody to be as settled and solid as you are, my dear. All's well that ends well."

"I hope and pray that it will end well, uncle Daniel; but I shall be uneasy until it is settled."

It soon transpired that Mary had ample cause for her uneasiness.

Uncle Daniel had hardly left the house to go the rounds of his cattle and crops, when aunt Sarah came in where the girl was sitting, and her white and troubled face told Mary that she had some unusual trouble on her mind.

"Such a strange story, my dear," she said, "as I have just heard in the dairy-house. It has quite upset me, and I don't know what to make of it."

"What is the matter, auntie?" asked the girl.

"You know that we mustn't bother our heads with all the talk of the niggers, though we do hear a good deal through them that we might not get hold of any other way. But Jennie, the yellow girl who looks after the milk, is as true and honest as anybody, and she would never invent a yarn, either to please us or to hurt us."

"What has she been telling you, aunt Sarah?"

"It is about Mr. Henning, my dear."

Mary turned pale, and her hands trembled so that she had to drop her work.

"Merciful Heaven!" she exclaimed. "I have been every moment afraid of hearing something terrible. And Susie has gone with him, and I am so worried. But please, aunt Sarah, don't keep me in suspense. Let me know the worst at once. What is the matter with him?"

"Nothing, I hope. He must be the right one. But it is so queer, if this story is true. You must know, Mary, that one of Mr. Wynne's hands comes over here now and then to see Jennie, and it's a long trip for him, too, and I wonder that his master lets him make it. He was over here last night, and told her a long story about Mr. Henning."

"It seems that Mr. Henning had been visiting at Mr. Wynne's, and was on his way home when he was caught by a crowd of people from Ryan's Fork, who wanted to hang him for a murder he had committed there."

"A murder!" exclaimed Mary.

"Yes, a cold-blooded, cowardly murder. But it turned out that he was not the man."

"Thank God for that!"

"That is where the queeriness comes in. He claimed that there is another man in this part of the country who is his exact image, and who has not only been guilty of all sorts of devilry, but has been passing under Mr. Henning's name. The Ryan's Fork people did not believe a word of that, and were going to hang him when Mr. Wynne came up. They were finally persuaded to take him to Ryan's Fork and give him a chance to send for his friends. Then Major Chappelle and some others came up there and proved him clear."

Mary was terribly agitated, though she tried hard to control herself.

"That is the strangest story I ever heard," said she. "It is a terrible story, too, and it frightens me. Please give me all the particulars you have heard, aunt Sarah."

The old lady told all she knew, and Jennie was called in and gave her version of the story as she had heard it from Cearley Wynne's man.

The more Mary heard, the more her trouble grew and strengthened.

"It is so strange," she said, "that Mr. Henning never mentioned that to us."

"Perhaps he was ashamed of it," suggested Mrs. Maybury.

"I doubt if he was ever ashamed of anything, auntie."

"You are so severe, Mary. Perhaps he was afraid of worrying us."

"I wish he had worried us in time, and had not left us to find out this trouble for ourselves. It seems now that there are two Fred Hennings, a true one and a false one. Which one is it who has gone off with Susie?"

"It is a fearful doubt, to be sure. I wish your uncle would come in, that we could tell him about it."

Uncle Daniel came in, and the story was repeated for his benefit.

He was greatly troubled by it, doubtless feeling more than he was willing to show; but he tried to put the best face on the affair that he could, as much for the sake of allaying his own apprehensions as of quieting the fears of the others.

"That beats all I ever heard of," said he. "It is a pity that Mr. Henning has a double, and that his double is a rascal. Let us hope that he will not be bothered by the scamp any more."

"But you are not looking at it right, protested Mary. "There is a serious question to consider. Is it the gentleman or the scamp, who has been here with us?"

That was the very question which had been worrying Daniel Maybury, though he was loth to admit it.

"You do upset one so, my dear," said he. "Of course our man must be all right. Judge Arroux, of Lake Charles, told one of our neigh-

bors that he is a wealthy man and an honorable man. I was careful to have inquiries made, and it was reported to me that he was just what he represented himself to be."

"Yes, uncle; we know that one of them is a good man; but which one? Suppose that this one should be the one who represents himself to be the other man?"

"You are so suspicious, Mary."

"If this one was the right one, he would have told us about the other one."

"If he wasn't the right one, would he have taken Susie to Major Chappelle's, where the other one lives?"

"Has he taken her there?"

This was a question that uncle Daniel could not answer, and it troubled him severely.

"I wish I knew," said Mary. "We must know, uncle. That is a question that can be answered only by a visit to Major Chappelle's. Ben and I will get our horses and ride down there, if you have no objection."

"I will go with you, instead of Ben. You are right, my dear. The doubt must be settled, and there is only one way to settle it."

Daniel Maybury and his niece lost no time in making the proposed visit.

The journey was a long one, and Mary had scarcely anything to say during the entire ride.

Her anxiety and fear were so great that she could hardly trust herself to mention her sister's name.

It was near the close of the day when they reached Rose Lawn, and, as they rode up to the house, they saw saddled horses hitched, as if some of the people had just come in, or were just about to go away.

Both of these possibilities were true.

Major Chappelle and Fred Henning, who had lately arrived from Lake Charles, were about to start on another expedition, and they came out of the house as the strangers arrived.

"It is all right, you see, Mary," joyfully exclaimed Daniel Maybury. "There is Mr. Henning."

"Yes, uncle—but which one?"

Uncle Daniel advanced and greeted Flush Fred pleasantly and confidently.

"Good-evening, Mr. Henning. I reckon you didn't expect to see Mary and me here. We were down this way, and thought we'd look in on you. How is Susie?"

Flush Fred's face told the story.

It suddenly turned pale, and his startled and astonished look made him ghastly.

The question, "How is Susie?" spoke too plainly of the harm that had been done in his name.

"Is this Daniel Maybury?" he asked, with a husky and unnatural voice.

"Is it Daniel Maybury? Why, of course it is. Have you forgotten me so soon?"

"We were just getting ready to go to your place, Mr. Maybury. Major, look to that lady!"

Mary's face had caught the reflection of Fred Henning's ghastly hue.

The steel of the truth had entered her heart, and she already knew too much.

Her nerveless hands relaxed their grasp of the bridle-rein as she reeled backward, and she would have fallen to the ground if Major Chappelle had not sprung forward and caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE STING OF THE SERPENT.

THERE were plenty to care for Mary Maybury when she was struck down by the shock of her great trouble.

The planter carried her tenderly up on the veranda, where he was met by his wife and Florence.

Kate Henning also came out with Mrs. Muggridge, and the insensible girl was carried into the house.

Daniel Maybury stared about wildly, as if he was dazed, and it seemed for a moment that the strong and burly farmer would faint as the girl had fainted.

"What's the matter with Mary?" he muttered. "What does all this mean, anyhow?"

"Light down, Mr. Maybury," answered Flush Fred. "Never mind the horses. They will be cared for. Come into the house, where you can rest and ask all the questions you want to."

The farmer dismounted, and suffered Fred to lead him upon the veranda as if he had been a child.

Major Chappelle had already brought out some refreshments, and he hastened to mix a julep for his guest.

"Couldn't touch it," said the farmer. "I can't drink a drop here until this thing is settled."

"But you must," insisted Fred. "You need it. You are so badly shaken up that you need something to revive you."

Uncle Daniel swallowed the invigorating draught, and looked steadily at Flush Fred.

"You told me, young man," said he, "that you were just getting ready to go to my place. We didn't expect you there, and—but, where is Susie?"

Fred shook his head mournfully, not knowing how he should best begin his explanation.

"Do you mean to say that she ain't here? Where is she? What is the matter?"

"I told you, Mr. Maybury, that I was intending to go to your place, and the cause of that intention is a very sad one. I was at Lake Charles to-day with Major Chappelle, and there we saw Judge Arnoux, who told us that inquiries had been made about me on your account because of your niece. Is it the young lady who came with you?"

"No; it is her sister, the one we came here to see. Didn't you take Susie from my place and bring her down here to visit your friends?"

"I did not, Mr. Maybury. I was never at your place. From what Judge Arnoux told me I was afraid that mischief was being done in my name, and I was going to stop it if possible. There is a scoundrel—"

"Yes, I know," groaned the farmer. "We heard that story this morning—about the murder at Ryan's Fork, and the hanging, and all that. It is what started me out. Mary was afraid of something all along; but I felt sure, even after I heard that story, that our man was the right one. But now—oh, this is dreadful! Where is Mary?"

"She is in the house. My wife and the others are attending to her."

"Your wife? Why, you told me—that is, the other did—that your wife was dead."

"My wife is alive and well, I am happy to say. That scoundrel's wife is here, too. Come in, Mr. Maybury, and see your niece. I hope she is better now."

By the kind attentions of Mrs. Chappelle and the other ladies Mary Maybury had been revived so that she was able to sit up and listen to what was told her, though she was yet so weak that a feather might have knocked her down.

It was not necessary to tell her much, as she guessed only too easily at the trouble that had fallen upon her.

She did not want them to beat about the bush, or to soften the story to her in any way, but begged them to let her know the worst as speedily and as plainly as possible.

She had learned the worst that could be told there when uncle Daniel came in, and it had not killed her or even shocked her, as the blow that she had already received had completely stunned her.

What mattered any details that might be grouped around the terrible fact of her sister's ruin?

"You were right, Mary," said the farmer, as he seated himself near her, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, uncle, I suppose there can be no doubt about it now. Here are the real Mr. Henning's friends, and here is his wife, and here is the deserted wife of the villain who has got poor Susie in his clutches."

"That's so," interrupted Mrs. Muggridge. "It was my husband. Jest like him to do that sort o' thing. It is too bad that jest when I have a chance to lay my hands on him, some woman gits hold of him and carries him off."

This was too much for the patience of even good Mrs. Chappelle.

"Mrs. Muggridge," said that lady severely, "if you say such a thing again, or anything like it, we will have nothing more to do with you. That remark was shamefully heartless."

"Was it, Mrs. Chappelle? I didn't know it. I never meant to be heartless, and I am sure that I am as sorry for this poor girl as any of you are. But I am very fond of him, you know, in spite of his faults, and it seems that everything takes him further away from me."

"After all," said Mary, "it was not he who carried my poor sister away, but her own imagination. We saw you on the Cyclone, Mr. Henning, when you went ashore to fight a duel, and Susie fell romantically in love with you. It was easy for that man, by putting himself in your place, to finish what had been begun."

"But you suspected him all along," suggested uncle Daniel. "How was that?"

"I did not like his ways, as you know; but I never had, until this morning, any reason to suppose that he was not what he represented himself to be. I can now see many points in which he differs greatly from Mr. Henning."

The horses of the visitors had been cared for, and Major Chappelle assured them that there was nothing for them to do but to remain at Rose Lawn for the present, especially as Mary was clearly unable to undertake any sort of a journey.

Food and rest were the first necessities for them both, and after supper a general council would be held, which would speedily decide what should be done.

At supper Mary Maybury could scarcely touch anything, and even uncle Daniel's appetite was seriously impaired.

But he recovered his strength and vigor, and after supper was hot for immediate action.

"You can hardly be more eager than we are," said Flush Fred. "Something must be done as speedily as possible, and you can rely upon us to the utmost extent. We have been intending to clean out those scoundrels on the Grosse Tete tract, but have been waiting for some legal formalities which Judge Arnoux

deemed proper. On our own account we have not been disposed to hurry matters. But now it is necessary to rescue that girl from the villain's clutches, if possible, and there is no time to lose. I think we have men enough. Anyhow, we ought to start with what we can get."

"My boy Ben will come as soon as I can get word to him," suggested the farmer.

"I think he will be here soon. Major Chappelle has sent a messenger to your place, to tell your people where you are and why you are here, and that will be likely to bring your son. He has also sent to Charley Wynne and Mr. Huntoon."

"We have lost no time, Mr. Maybury, I assure you," said the planter. "But our most important man happens to be away just now, and we must wait for him, whether we will or not. Hark Sanders is the man, and he is the only one who can guide us into the tract. As soon as he comes we will know what to do and how to do it."

"He must have taken poor Susie in there," remarked uncle Daniel. "We must find the child, though I can scarcely hope that we will find her alive. As for him—"

"As for him," said Flush Fred, "he has too long been a curse to this earth, and hanging is too good for him."

It was agreed by the men that hanging would be too easy a death for Joe Musgrove or Muggridge; but they avoided any further mention of him in the presence of his wife.

Night had come as they sat there on the veranda, and Rose Lawn was as peaceful and quiet as if there were no scoundrels in the world to disturb its tranquillity.

This silence was soon broken by the sound of horses' hoofs, and several men could be seen in the darkness as they slowly rode toward the house.

"Who can these people be?" demanded Major Chappelle. "Surely it is too soon for Charley Wynne or Huntoon to get here."

"And my Ben is further off than they," observed Uncle Daniel.

"It is Hark Sanders!" exclaimed Flush Fred. "But who are the men he is bringing here?"

The leader of the approaching party was Hark Sanders, and behind him rode four men, well mounted, with Texas saddles, and each carrying a rifle.

"Here's some more of 'em, major," said the guide, as he arrayed his followers in front of the house.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TRAIL OF DEATH.

A SHORT distance to the eastward of the Sabine river, which they had lately crossed, four men were camped at the edge of a grove of timber and near a creek.

Their horses, picketed close to them, were grazing on the prairie grass, and the men, who had just eaten their supper, were tranquilly smoking their pipes, preparatory to a night's rest.

Two of the men were of middle age, strong and vigorous, and the other two were active young men.

All were rough and sturdy Texans, evidently inured to dangers and exposures, accustomed to fatigue, and scantily supplied, if at all, with the article of fear.

They were closely related to the man and youth who had taken the trail which they were on in pursuit of the cattle which Jesse Sloper stole, and who had followed it until their sudden and cowardly murder terminated the trail.

The leader of the party was Randolph Martin, brother of the John Martin who lost the cattle, and the two young men were his sons, Jefferson and Monroe.

The other man was Nathan Gallup, brother of John Martin's wife—that is to say, of his widow.

Quite a family party, but not "on pleasure bent" by any means.

Their errand was one of discovery and vengeance, and they fully appreciated its difficulty and danger.

They knew as well as John Martin had known that the old road through the Grosse Tete tract was a perilous trail, and they also knew that there had been no return for him and his son after they entered it.

It was literally a trail of death; but these men were determined to follow it, prepared to force an accounting with any man or set of men who should cross their path.

"We are on the right trail," said Randolph Martin. "I suppose we are all agreed to see this thing through."

"Yes, indeed," answered Gallup. "We are late enough startin' in, but better's late than never."

"Well, you know how it was, Nat. My old woman was powerful skeery after John failed to come back, and she wouldn't hear of my goin' off to look for him. Reckon she never would have allowed it, if Ann hadn't got around her so, and if the boys hadn't teased her."

"Yes, Rand, it takes the women folks to hold a man back. Lucky fur me that I hain't got nobody to resk but myself. But we are foot-

loose now, and when we all pull together, suthin's got to give."

"That's like to be so; but we must be askeerful as if we was in the Injun country. Mebbe it's a leetle wuss'n that, as we don't know what to look for. You and the boys can turn in, Nat, whenever you want to, as I am goin' to stand the fu'st watch."

At daybreak the next morning the four were fairly started on the death-trail, and their progress was rapid but careful.

"It must be a long time sence anybody has traveled this road," remarked Randolph Martin. "Seems to me as if I could see every now and then the tracks of John's and Harry's hosses."

"No sech luck as that," replied Nat Gallup. "Wish we could see 'em, as then we would have suthin' to foller, and might be sure o' what we was doin'."

"We will see somethin', though, afore we get back, and do somethin', too. I feel it in my bones."

When they reached the wild region known as the Grosse Tete tract they advanced more slowly and more carefully, every rifle ready for instant use, and every eye and ear on the alert.

In passing through the open or prairie reaches they had plain sailing, but when they came near timber, or entered the forest, they took greater precautions.

Usually one went in advance, on each side of the old road, a little way into the woods, to guard against lurking foes or a possible ambush.

But there was nothing to be seen or heard but the usual sights and sounds of the wilderness, and they were obliged to spur each other up to watchfulness, lest the prolonged period of safety should make them careless.

They made no fire when they halted for the mid-day meal, but contented themselves with cold victuals and water.

As they went further on, they began to observe evidences of the passage or presence of human beings.

Very slight were the indications, but sufficient to inform the Texans that they were not alone in the wilderness, and to cause them to be even more cautious and watchful than they had yet been.

They were moving forward, slowly and carefully, in the shade of the great trees and their hanging banners of moss, through which the sunlight came only in streaks and patches, when their progress was brought to a sudden stop.

Jefferson Martin, who was in advance on the left, rode out into the trail, halted there and held up his hand warningly, but without looking back at his friends.

Then he beckoned to them to advance, and they came forward silently until they reached him.

He pointed, without speaking, at something lying in the grass before him—something that made them shudder and turn pale.

Two skeletons were there—or human remains that lacked little of being skeletons—with bits of garments scattered about, showing the work of the birds and beasts of prey.

"Just as I thought," muttered Randolph Martin. "They've been murdered, and the murderers didn't have decency enough to put 'em under the ground."

"Mebbe 'tain't them," suggested Gallup. "We can soon settle that pint. 'Light down, Nat, and we'll look closer."

The two elder men dismounted and approached the remains, while the lads retained their positions and stood guard over them.

"No doubt about it, I'm afraid," said the leader, as he looked at the bleached skulls and fleshless bones. "But I am sure to know John by his teeth."

He shuddered as he examined the larger skull, but soon satisfied himself.

"It is John," he said, "and that is Harry. Look at the hole in the boy's head, where they shot him! Oh, how shall we ever tell his mother?"

The sturdy man bowed his head on his hands, and tears trickled through his fingers.

Suddenly the click of Jefferson's rifle broke the silence.

"Halt there, and throw up your hands!" ordered the young man, not with a loud voice, but in a firm and peremptory tone.

The others turned instantly, their weapons ready for action.

Jefferson's rifle was pointed at a man who stood a few rods away, in the middle of the trail.

He was a bearded and rough-looking man, but was evidently disposed to be peaceful, as he had already laid down his rifle, and his hands went up as soon as the order was given.

Randolph Martin's bronzed face lighted up as he caught sight of the stranger.

"Put up your gun, Jeff," he ordered. "I know that man, and I know that Hark Sanders is neither a murderer nor a thief."

Hark Sanders, who had recognized the Texan, quickly came forward to meet them.

"I knowed that you folks didn't belong to

the Grosse Tete gang," said he, "and that is why I showed up. I'm glad to see you, Martin; but you must come right away from here. Don't stop, but follow me."

"We have found the bones of my brother and his son here, where they were murdered," answered Martin.

"Yes, I know; but you mustn't wait here, unless you want to be murdered, too."

"We must bury them, at least."

"Yes, but not now. The devils who work these woods are liable to be about, and they know all the tricks and turns so well that decent men don't stand no show. Come right along with me, and when we're out of danger, I've got lots to tell you. It's jest what you want to know, too."

"Come, boys," said Martin. "We can trust Hark Sanders."

The hunter led them swiftly away from the trail of death and through the forest, until he came to a glade where his horse was tethered.

Then he mounted and rode on, scarcely speaking or allowing his companions to speak, and finally halted at the bank of a stream some two miles from the place where they had left the skeletons.

"I ken take you back to those bones whenever you want to go there," said Hark. "No danger that anybody will carry 'em off. What you want is to settle with the scoundrels who murdered your folks, and that's what I'm goin' to show you how to do. Listen to me, now."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FATAL FUSE.

It was night, but early night yet, as it was not long since supper had been eaten, and the members of the Squatters' League of Six, as the Grove Tete gang styled themselves, were assembled in their common room in "the old place" on the tract.

All were there but their leader, Joe Musgrove.

Since his capture of Sue Maybury, he had kept himself aloof from the others, having as little to do with them as possible, and taking no part in their plans.

When any of them chanced to meet him they found him gloomy, sour and morose, without a pleasant word even for Matt Burns, who was still his faithful friend and ally.

They knew that he was angry with them because of their drunken incursion upon his housekeeping at the old mill-site, which he declared had upset his plans and done him great injury.

But he had other reasons, as well, that disposed him to keep to himself.

"The truth is, boys," Simon Casterfield had said, "that Joe don't dare to leave his doxy, for fear that he will never see her again."

"Should think it would be the other way," remarked Steve Lowry.

"How the other way, Steve?"

"That he wouldn't dare to stay where she is, fur fear of gittin' killed. She's got the devil in her big enough to cut his heart out if she should ketch him nappin'; and I don't believe he has had a wink of sleep since he got her. It ain't to be expected that both of 'em will stay in this world much longer."

"She will be the death of him, sure," said Casterfield. "Mind what I tell you, boys—when Joe gets wiped out, that girl will be the cause of it."

The estrangement had been so far accepted by the gang, that they had about concluded to get along without Musgrove, and since Herman Steenbrook had got well, they were nearly unanimous on this point.

The evening mentioned, that found the five seated together at "the old place," had witnessed the act of choosing Simon Casterfield as chief of the band, *vice* Joe Musgrove, deposed.

The only dissenting voice had been that of Matt Burns, who had contented himself with simply giving a negative vote.

This change had been consummated, and they were preparing to celebrate the event in the way that pleased them best, when their quick ears caught the sound of approaching footsteps.

"It's Joe," said Matt Burns, and he opened the door and let in the late chief.

His comrades noticed immediately that his countenance was much brighter than they had recently seen it.

There seemed to be a new light in his eyes, and he carried himself vigorously erect, with the bearing of a man who has made some brilliant discovery, or has come to some decisive determination.

"Just in time, Joe!" shouted Steve Lowry.

"We are startin' in here to drink the health of the new capt'in."

"Who is that?" pleasantly inquired Musgrove.

"Simon Casterfield. Since you've gone back on us, we had to pick up another man, and Simon seemed to fill the bill the best."

"All right, Steve. If you men are suited, I am sure that I am. Allow me to congratulate you, Simon. I have thought for some time that you were wanting the place, and you are

heartily welcome to it, so far as I am concerned. I never cared to be any kind of a boss, you see, though it was precious little bossing I did when you called me captain. Give me a pull at the whisky, boys, and I will drink health and success to Simon."

Joe Musgrove took his deposition so well that he was more than ever in favor with his comrades, who hastened to supply him with as much whisky as he cared to drink.

"Here's success to Simon!" he said as he tossed off his liquor. "It is not worth while to wish long life to any of us, as men of our stamp don't look forward to that sort of thing."

Whisky flowed freely, everybody emptying his cup and filling it as he pleased, and the party bid fair to degenerate into an assemblage of riotous and finally helpless drunkards.

But Joe Musgrove had something else in view, and he sought to put a stop to the intoxication before it should be carried too far.

"Come, boys," said he. "We mustn't let the liquor make fools of us. What do you say to a game of poker?"

A hush fell upon the party, and not a voice was raised in favor of this proposition.

"What's the matter?" demanded Musgrove.

"No more poker," solemnly announced Casterfield.

"No more poker? What does that mean? Have you all joined the church? When did you reform and turn over a new leaf?"

"To-night, since the boys chose me captain in your place. The first order I issued was no more playing poker with you."

"With me? I am the one, then, that this shot is aimed at, and you are the one, Simon, that I am to thank for it. Why is it that nobody is to play any more poker with me?"

"Because you play too well, or have too much luck, or there is something about you that makes you win everything we can get hold of, and nobody knows what becomes of the money. We only know that we never have any while we play poker with you."

"That's a fine thing to grumble at, and you are a pretty set to grumble at me. Who has been more liberal than I have been? Didn't I give up to the rest of you all my share in all the cattle and niggers?"

"Yes, for that furniture down at the mill-site. And then you turned in and beat us out of every dollar there was in the crowd. No, Joe Musgrove, there's not going to be any more poker-playing with you. That's my order, and the boys will be glad enough to obey it."

Musgrove was so gloomy and crestfallen under this positive declaration, that it might be supposed that he had set his heart on a game, probably with the intention of replenishing his purse, and that was doubtless the opinion of his comrades.

He looked around upon them all, and sighed as he saw no signs of yielding.

Then he helped himself to a cup full of whisky, and drank it down at a gulp.

But he changed his tactics, and smiled pleasantly upon the party as he made a fresh attack.

"You know, boys, that you broke my hand all up when you got full and came over to my place. The way you upset my arrangements then worried me badly, and now I must confess that I need a little money to straighten me up and set things right. Who will stake me?"

There was no sudden rush of subscribers to the fund—far from it, indeed—and Casterfield was the first to speak.

"Where are you going to, Joe?"

"Going to? Did I say I was going anywhere? I am not going anywhere—that is, not to make any sort of a stay. But I want a little money, and I should think that some of you might be willing to help me out."

Casterfield shook his head, and that was the cue for the others.

"I've got no money to spare," said he, "and I don't believe any of the others have. You cleaned us out too well the last time we played poker with you. I wonder what you do with all the money you get hold of, anyhow."

Musgrove arose, glowering savagely at his comrades.

"Will none of you, then, be asked, lend a few dollars to an old friend and partner?"

There was no response to this final appeal.

"The truth is, Joe Musgrove," said Casterfield, "that if you want to get anything out of us, you will have to come under and work for it. Outside of that, we are done with you."

"That is enough," fiercely replied Musgrove. "You have treated me shamefully, and I know why you have done it. For my part, I am glad to be shut out of such a set. But some of you will be sorry for this before you are much older. Come with me, Matt. I want to speak to you."

Without another word he left the room, and Matt Burns followed him.

"What did he mean, Simon, by saying that we will be sorry for this?" asked Steve Lowry, when their late leader had withdrawn.

"That's nothing but talk, Steve. What could he do? If he should turn traitor, he knows well enough that he would be the first they would hang. Besides, this ranch is played out, and we are going to emigrate to-morrow."

Joe Musgrove led his follower to a dark place

under the trees, out of sight and hearing of the old house.

"My mind was made up before I went there, Matt," said he. "If they had treated me fairly, I might have given them a better show; but it is settled now that you and I will leave here to-night."

"And the girl?" inquired Matt.

"Yes. She shall go with us, of course."

"Will she go?"

"She will have to."

"But she hates you now, Joe, and may make trouble."

"Never mind that. Leave it all to me. I am going to take you away from here, Matt, and you may depend upon me to give you a splendid chance when we are out of this mess. Go and get the horses ready, Matt—the three of them—and take them to the big tree at the creek. I will join you there shortly."

Matt Burns glided away through the forest, and Musgrove watched him out of sight.

Then he turned, and silently walked toward the house until he was beyond the cover of the trees, when he stooped and crept forward, as if to avoid any possible observation of those within.

There was a cellar under the old house, and the entrance to it was by an outside door—a door which had been put there by the present occupants, and of which Joe Musgrove carried a key.

He crept to the door, unlocked it, raised it, and silently stole down the rickety steps.

It was as dark as a stack of black cats down there; but Musgrove was prepared for the darkness.

He took from his pocket a bit of candle, lighted it, and carefully set it on a box so that it faintly illuminated the cellar.

Directly over his head he could plainly hear the loud voices of the riotous party he had lately left.

"They are rejoicing over my downfall," he muttered. "The mean hounds won't find it so funny when their rise comes."

He stepped to a keg that stood in a corner, removed a stopper from the head, and felt within with his finger.

The keg was nearly filled with powder.

He took a small coil of fuse from his pocket, unrolled it, and thrust one end into the keg of powder.

The rest of the fuse he measured with his hands, after consulting his watch, and cut a piece from the end.

"I will give them half an hour," he muttered. "They will be too drunk to stir, and that will settle their business."

He lighted the end of the fuse with the bit of candle, extinguished the light, and silently crept out of the cellar, closing and locking the door behind him.

When he had gained the cover of the forest he turned and looked back, shaking his fist at the old house.

"Curse the dogs!" he bitterly exclaimed. "When they thought they were safe in fooling with me, they were mistaken in the man."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A WOMAN IN THE WAY.

It was evening in the dilapidated log house at the old mill site on the Grosse Tete tract.

A dingy oil lamp shed a dim light over the interior; but none of its rays penetrated to the outside through the thick door and the planking that covered the windows.

On the rude table were a few dishes with a scanty and uninviting repast; but no knife or fork was visible—no implement or utensil that in any hands could be regarded as dangerous.

On a bench in a corner sat, almost crouching there, a young woman whom it would not have been easy to recognize as the Sue Maybury whose bright face and graceful form had made glad her uncle Daniel's home.

Not only was she disfigured by the neglected condition of her clothing, her uncombed hair, and her dejected demeanor, indicative of a broken spirit; but her face had suffered a sad and notable change.

Her fair cheeks had become sunken, rather than pale, and her countenance wore a hard, set look, that would have better fitted a much older woman.

On her left cheek was a livid scar, or welt, that told a fearful story of its own.

Though her eyes were swollen, as if by recent weeping, they were unnaturally bright, glaring balefully from the darkness of the corner where she crouched like some wild thing that has been captured, and starved and beaten.

At the table was seated a man who occasionally trifled with the food before him, but scarcely tasted it.

There was a gloomy and downcast look in his face, quite independent of the scowl that darkened his features when he now and then stole a glance at the woman in the corner.

When he did look in that direction, the baleful glare of her wild eyes compelled him to withdraw his gaze.

The man was Joe Musgrove, or Muggridge, and life was dark and unsatisfactory to him just then.

He had lied, and stolen, and deceived, and murdered to gain a loss.

He had been guilty of a great wrong, and his crime had recoiled upon himself.

It was necessary that he should free his mind, and at last he spoke.

"I should think you might come out of the sulks, Susie. You have been in that business long enough."

There was no answer, and he went on without looking at her.

"If you fancy that you will make things any easier for you by that way of going on, you are mistaken. It is not likely that I will be very fond of you if you turn yourself into a fright. You were a pretty girl a while ago; but there's precious little beauty about you now."

She spoke then, bitterly, and in a harsh and unnatural voice.

"If I thought that I had any beauty left that would make you fond of me, I would never rest until I had destroyed it."

"It looks to me as if you won't rest until you have destroyed me, or made an end of me somehow. It is too bad, when I want to be kind to you and do the fair thing by you. Something will break if this goes on any longer. You have forced me to hide the knives and forks, and I don't dare to leave my pistol around. You are starving yourself, and I don't get enough to eat to keep a chicken alive. I am going to leave this country, Susie, and to take you with me. When I get you away from here I will marry you. I would have done so before, if it hadn't been for those drunken fools. Are you listening to me? What are you thinking about now?"

"I am wondering," she answered, with a look that made him drop his eyes.

"What sort of a wonder has got hold of you now?"

"I am wondering whether I shall live to see you hanged. I am so afraid that they may catch you and hang you when I am not there to see, or that I may die before your time comes."

"Devilish pleasant prospect for me. So you want to live to see me hanged. You must behave better, or you may miss the chance. Durned if I ain't more than half afraid to take you with me, anyhow. But I am going to leave here to-night, and you may go or stay. What do you mean to do about it?"

"I will go where you go."

"Very well; but you are not to follow me just yet. I am going over to the old place now, to get some money. I will be back in an hour or so, and will then be ready to start. I wish you would rig yourself up so as to look as well as you can."

He went out of the house, and locked the door behind him, leaving her shut in.

But she was not, perhaps, so completely a prisoner as he supposed her to be.

He had been gone but a few minutes when she crept to a corner of the room, raised a bit of rotten plank, and drew forth an old and broken case-knife.

The rust had been rubbed off the remainder of the blade, and it had been shaped and sharpened until it was nearly ready for use as a screw-driver.

She hastened to complete the fashioning of the tool by rubbing it briskly on a stone that she pulled out of the hearth.

At this task she worked with amazing energy, considering her evident weakness and exhaustion; but it was a feverish and uncertain strength that she put into the labor, and every now and then she was compelled to pause to take breath and rest her hands.

But she kept at it, working as hard as it was possible for her to work, and soon had the tool she wanted.

Wearily she rose to her feet, moved the table and the light near the door, and began to work upon the lock with her screw-driver, with the object of taking it off.

It was a hard and tiresome task, as the long screws were deeply set into the tough old oak, and her weak and delicate wrists were not at all fitted for such employment.

One screw moved, and an exclamation of almost maniacal joy burst from her white lips as she drew it out.

The others worried and wearied her, and more than once she seemed to be on the point of abandoning the effort.

But again and again she returned to the charge, with wild and desperate energy, until the last screw was removed.

The lock fell upon the floor, and she sunk beside it.

After a moment of weakness she roused herself, and opened the door.

"I had not thought it was so late," she muttered as she looked out into the darkness.

She picked up a thin shawl that she had brought from home—a bit of finery that was to have adorned her during her visit at Rose Lawn—threw it over her head, and rushed out into the night.

A damp and chilly wind, heavy with the vapors of the neighboring swamp, blew in at the open door, and extinguished the light in the dingy lamp.

Darkness was behind her, and before her was nothing but darkness.

She paused, as much for the purpose of summoning up her energy, as to consider what she would do next.

"I am free," she said; "but what is my freedom worth? What can I do with it? If I could find my way out of this horrible place, where could I go? I could not go home. I can never, never see any one of them again. I am as much lost to them, and as much lost to myself, as if I were dead. Dead—that is the only word that suits me. Death must come soon, and the sooner the better. No—not quite that. There is one thing to live for yet—just one. Which way did he go?"

She looked upon the ground, and saw a pretty plain path that led in a westerly direction.

At the same time she raised her hand that still held the fragment of a knife, and concealed the inefficient weapon in her dress.

"He said that he was going to the old place, whichever that may be. This path, I think, must lead to it. I will follow him, and who knows but my chance may come to-night? If I could pray at all now, I would pray for that, and that only."

She followed the path with swift steps, frequently stumbling in the darkness, and now and then stopping to take breath.

During one of these pauses she heard footsteps ahead.

She ran aside, crouched down under some bushes, and waited.

Down the path came rapidly a man whom she recognized as Musgrove's friend, Matt Burns.

He was not the one she wanted, and she crept forth from her hiding-place when he had passed by, and resumed her course.

On she went, stumbling and stopping as before, and at times losing her way and finding it again, but stubbornly pressing forward, in spite of the exhaustion that was overcoming her.

At last she was obliged to halt and lean against a tree for rest.

As she looked forward, she thought she saw a clearing ahead, with something beyond that looked like the dark form of a house.

That must be the "old place," and Musgrove could not be far away.

Still she gazed, until she saw a man approaching her from the direction of the house, and was almost sure that it was him for whom she was looking.

She stepped behind the tree, whose trunk was large enough to shelter her in the darkness, and watched him as he came toward her.

His motions were slow, as if he was in no sort of a hurry, and every now and then he partly stopped and looked back.

Suddenly a new element of life entered the scene and changed it.

A man's voice rang out, strong and clear in the darkness:

"Halt, there!"

Musgrove glanced over his shoulder, and started to run.

"Halt! I say; or I'll shoot!"

There was no halt, and a pistol-shot followed; but Musgrove ran on without stopping.

As he came down the path she saw him plainly, and recognized him then beyond a doubt.

She also saw the dark form of a man in the distance behind him, and that man was evidently pursuing him.

Somebody was trying to catch him.

Was it one of the people who wanted to hang him?

Would she live to see him hanged?

If she wished to witness that event, he must be caught, and why should she not help to catch him?

She pulled off the light shawl that she had thrown over her head, and her breath came quickly as she awaited his approach.

Down the path he ran, and behind him pattered the swift steps of his pursuer.

As he reached the tree behind which she was concealed—running straight on, without looking to one side or the other—she suddenly sprang out into the path, and threw over him the shawl that she held in both hands.

Instantly, though hardly arresting his course, the quick strain came upon him, and at the same time pulled her forcibly forward.

But she fell upon him, instead of dropping to the ground, and with swift and convulsive action began to wind it around him, so as to bind his arms and hamper his movements.

Doubtless it was the surprise of this attack, rather than her strength, that brought him to a halt; but the constraint upon his arms was something that must be got rid of, and he struggled instinctively.

His astonishment increased when he saw his assailant.

"Sue!" he shouted, with a fearful oath. "What are you doing here?"

Dropping her grasp of the shawl, she endeavored to seize and hold him.

"Here he is!" she cried. "Come and take him!"

She did not know who was pursuing him, or why he was pursued, but was possessed by a mad desire to hold him for the rope.

He had torn one arm free from the entangling shawl; but she was clinging to him frantically.

"Curse you!" he muttered, as he raised his arm. "Take that!"

The blade of a knife gleamed in the night air, and it descended upon her breast.

Again it fell, and she sunk before him, under his blood-stained hand, still clinging to him with the grasp of death.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DOUBLE AGAINST DOUBLE.

HARK SANDERS imparted to the Texans in a very short time the information that he wished to give them; but it interested them greatly.

"You see, now," he said, "that we've got to be keener how we take hold of those scamps. There ain't many of 'em, I reckon; but they're so well fixed, and they know the tract so perfectly, that it won't do to fool with 'em, or to jump in without knowin' whar we're goin' to 'light. Come up to Major Chappelle's, and you'll find him and the rest of us glad enough to go in with you and clean 'em out."

Randolph Martin was quite willing to follow the advice and lead of Hark Sanders, a man whom he knew he could trust implicitly.

The party went on to Major Chappelle's, where Hark introduced the Texans as "some more of 'em," and briefly explained where and how he had found them.

Major Chappelle and his friends already knew of the murder of John Martin and his son, having got the particulars of that affair from Jesse Sloper before his death; but the arrival of the Texans, and their account of the discovery of the remains of their murdered relatives, brought the horrible deed to their minds more forcibly than ever, and excited their intensest indignation.

Hark Sanders, who had learned about the disappearance of Sue Maybury while he was eating his supper with the Texans, also urged immediate action.

But none of the party needed to be urged.

"We must act at once," said Flush Fred. "There is no need to wait a moment longer. Legal formalities are not worth heeding at such a time as this, and we have already wasted too many days. There are enough of us, and we must do the work now."

It was agreed that there was no time like the present and that night would afford the best opportunity for a surprise.

Weapons were hastily put in order and horses were brought out, and in a very short time the expedition was ready to start.

General Brayham, who insisted on joining the party, would not be denied.

Dave Wintersmith, a valuable ally, was brought in by Hark Sanders.

Just as they were ready to start they were joined by Charley Wynne.

He had met the messenger who was on his way to Wynne-or-lose, and had ridden down to Rose Lawn at headlong speed in his usual style.

This brought the party up to a dozen men, a force believed to be amply sufficient to cope with the marauders and clean out the Grosse Tete tract.

Hark Sanders was appointed the leader and guide, and he led them so well and in such a direct line to their destination, that Rose Lawn was soon left far behind them.

In entering the dreaded Grosse Tete tract he took the same route by which he had brought the Texans out.

He knew that way so well that he could follow his course at night as well as in the daytime, and he believed that he would thus be able more quickly to reach the den of the outlaws and effect a surprise.

Halting at the same glade where he had tethered his horse before he met the Texans, he directed his companions to dismount, and they left their horses there in charge of Major Chappelle's negro men who had come with them for that purpose.

Then he led them forward through the forest until they reached the old road that crossed the tract, striking it at the point where the bones of John Martin and his son lay bleaching in the weather.

Though the night was moonless, it was not too dark for them to see plainly those pathetic remembrances of a cruel and cowardly crime, and the sight kindled their anger anew to the fierceness of a white heat.

The Texans gripped their rifles, and demanded that they should be led without delay to the haunt of the murderers.

"We must make a sure thing of it, Hark," insisted Randolph Martin. "No slips or comebacks about this business. Not a scoundrel of them must get away alive."

"Don't forget the girl!" pleaded Daniel Maybury. "She must be found, whatever else is done or left undone. If we should not find her with the rest of them, we must save one man and force him to confess what has become of her."

"Everything must be settled before we leave these woods," said Fred Henning. "We have come here to do thorough work and make a clean sweep of this business."

Hark Sanders led the party a little further up the old road, and then through the forest until they came in sight of a disused and partly overgrown clearing.

Across the clearing was an old log-house that loomed up in the darkness so that it looked larger than it really was.

"That's the place," said the guide, "and I reckon the scamps are in thar. Don't you see a light shinin' through the chinks?"

The others thought they saw it, and arrangements for an attack were speedily made.

It would doubtless be easy to surprise the outlaws if they were in the old building; but at the same time it was necessary to guard it so that they should not escape.

With this object in view the guide made such a disposition of his forces as should enable them to surround the house.

Two men were to be stationed on each of three sides of the building, while Sanders, with the Texans, should attack the front or south side.

Fred Henning and Charley Wynne were assigned to the east side, and they went swiftly and silently to take their stations.

Hardly had Flush Fred placed himself in the position that he wished to occupy, when a glance to the eastward showed him a man slowly making off into the forest.

Fred started in that direction, ordering the man to halt; but instead of obeying the order, he began to run.

As another hail produced no better effect, and a pistol-shot only accelerated the speed of the fugitive, Fred followed him at a lope.

Though he quickened his pace until he was running his best, he did not seem to gain on his quarry, and he had cocked his pistol to fire again, when the man's course was suddenly arrested by a woman who sprang out from behind a tree and seized him.

The pursuer strove to increase his pace, quickened by the cry of the woman.

He saw that the fugitive, though struggling violently, was unable to escape at the moment, and he rapidly overhauled him.

As he drew nearer he recognized the man.

It was Joe Musgrove—his double!

Who should the woman be, then, but the girl whom the scoundrel had stolen from her home? This discovery sent a tingle through his frame, and at the same moment he saw something else that filled him with a ravenous desire to get there.

Musgrove had drawn a knife, and once and again the gleaming blade descended savagely upon her.

She dropped, and partly dragged him downward in her fall.

Again he struggled desperately to free himself from her death-clutch and from the filmy folds of something that clung about him.

He had just succeeded in shaking off both the incumbrances, when he was confronted by Flush Fred.

The sight and the recognition startled him so that he hesitated, and for an instant he stood there irresolute.

In that instant Fred found time to take breath and to decide what he should do.

He was face to face with his double, but no longer had the strange feelings that had moved him when he encountered the man in the daytime.

What chiefly controlled him just then was the motionless figure of the girl on the ground bathed in her own blood, and that turned him into an avenger, an incarnate image of justice.

He might have shot the man as he stood there; but that would never do; he must be taken alive, to be reserved for a severer punishment.

Something must be done, and that quickly, either by the man who wished to escape, or by the man who desired to take him.

It was the former who made the first move.

Raising his blood-stained knife, the false Fred Henning rushed upon the true one.

The latter did not await the rush or the blow.

Throwing himself swiftly forward, his breast was beating against that of his double before the knife could fall, and his sinewy arms twined around him and held him helpless.

Musgrove would doubtless have been fully a match for his antagonist, if he had not been overcome by the horror of his own deed and had not been taken at a disadvantage.

Fred, moreover, had skill at command as well as strength.

As soon as he seized his adversary he knocked one of his feet from under him with a wrestling trip, and Musgrove fell backward to the ground with Henning on top of him.

Even then Fred might have found it difficult to subdue him, because of the knife he held; but help was at hand.

Charley Wynne had missed his comrade, and had heard his hail and his pistol shot.

Looking around, he saw Henning in pursuit of a flying man, and he ran after them both, reaching the scene of conflict just as they fell to the ground together.

He at once joined his force to that of his friend, and they quickly disarmed and bound the prostrate man, tying his hands and feet with poor Sue Maybury's shawl.

She had not lived to see the villain hanged, but had been the instrument of vengeance, and had left that bitter remembrance for him.

As Fred Henning and Charley Wynne rose to their feet, almost breathless from their exertions, there was a heavy explosion that shook the still air, and for an instant the forest was lighted up.

Musgrove's face was lighted up, too, as if by a flash of triumph, and then he closed his eyes, as if resigning himself to his fate.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HANGING TOO GOOD FOR HIM.

In pursuance of Hark Sanders's plan of surrounding the house, Major Chappelle and Frank had been assigned to the west side, and Dave Wintersmith and Daniel Maybury to the north side.

They had gone to take their positions, and Hark Sanders and the others were preparing to attack in front, when Fred Henning's discovery of Musgrove attracted their attention and temporarily disarranged their plan.

Fred's hail and his pistol-shot caused them all to look in that direction.

"Henning has found somebody," said General Brayham. "Ought we not to go and help him—some of us?"

"No," answered the guide. "He is able to take care of himself. Thar is only one man, I reckon. You may move around to that side, if you will. We've got enough to do right here. I'm sure that the most of 'em are in thar. I hear 'em stirrin' around now."

The sound of Fred Henning's hail and his shot had been borne to the gang inside, and it stirred them up.

After a brief delay the door was opened, and Steve Lowry looked out.

Hark Sanders's rifle was already at his shoulder and pointed in that direction.

"Surrender!" shouted the guide.

Lowry dodged back, closing the door behind him, and the house was dark and still again.

Sanders might have shot him down at the instant of his exposure; but the intention was to take the outlaws alive if possible.

This made another consultation necessary, as the presence of the attacking party had become known to their enemies, and a surprise was out of the question.

"Durn'd ef I know jest what's the safest and best plan to git at 'em now," admitted the guide.

"The surest and easiest way will be to set fire to the shebang," said Randolph Martin.

"Then, if they don't want to burn up, we can shoot 'em or ketch 'em as they run out."

"I believe you're right, Martin. No sort of a death would be too rough for the rascals. I'll go an' see what the major says about it."

He did not need to go.

Something happened just then that upset their calculations and did their work for them.

There was a terrific explosion inside of the old house, and a considerable portion of it sailed upward into the air.

Joe Musgrove's fatal fuse had done its work well, burning but a little longer than he had expected it to.

The explosion in the close cellar had exerted its force upward, sending the floor and the men who were gathered upon it through the roof.

There was a crashing and snapping of timber, and a rain of rafters, shingles and debris generally, from which the men outside hastened to escape.

Luckily none of them were seriously injured, though a few were struck by flying fragments.

The forest was lighted up for a moment, and then all was darker than before, until the wreck caught fire and began to blaze up.

Hark Sanders hastened to search in and about the ruins, by the light of the growing conflagration, for the men whom they had hoped to capture, but found only one of them alive.

This was Simon Casterfield, who had gone through the roof and landed outside, with one of his legs torn off.

"Is there enough of him left to hang?" eagerly demanded the leader of the Texans, as he perceived that the wretch was still breathing.

There was not enough, as death quickly claimed what was left of him.

Charley Wynne came running up, to view the results of the explosion and inquire into its cause; but nobody knew any more about it than he did.

"There must have been some carelessness among them," remarked Major Chappelle, "as it is not to be supposed that they would deliberately blow themselves up. What have you been doing, Charley? Where is Henning?"

"He has caught the chief of the scoundrels—his double—and has him safe."

"Has he told what has become of that poor girl?" feebly inquired Daniel Maybury.

"We have found her," answered Charley, and his look and tone gave a sufficient indication of the nature of the find.

"Dead?"

"Dead, Mr. Maybury. The villain had just killed her when Mr. Henning caught him. It was she who stopped him and held him."

With a cry of rage and anguish uncle Daniel

started off on the path that led toward the east, and the others followed him.

Flush Fred had placed his prisoner in a sitting posture against the trunk of a tree, and was standing there, guarding him with a cocked revolver.

Daniel Maybury threw himself on the ground at the side of his dead niece, and burst into tears, while the others stood around with set faces and compressed lips.

When the old man arose, Randolph Martin had uncoiled from his waist a rawhide rope.

Then Musgrove spoke for the first time.

"I suppose you are going to hang me," he said. "Tell me one thing first. I blew up that house, and was getting away from there when—when I was caught. Did any of them escape?"

"They are all dead," answered Major Chappelle.

"I am glad of that, anyhow. I don't care what becomes of me now."

"Hanging is too good for him," sternly remarked Flush Fred, as he looked at the rawhide rope.

"Hanging is too good for him," mournfully repeated uncle Daniel.

"Hangin's a durned sight too good for him!" savagely shouted Randolph Martin.

They did not say what they meant to do; but there could be no doubt that it was the unanimous opinion of the party that hanging was too good for him.

The Texans raised him to his feet, and bound him firmly to the tree with the rawhide rope, tying it here and there with many knots.

Then they gathered brush and dry wood, which they piled about him plentifully.

Musgrove was terrified when he perceived their purpose.

"Not that!" he cried, in anguish. "For God's sake, not that!"

Fred Henning pointed at the lifeless form of Sue Maybury, and that was the only answer to his entreaties.

Major Chappelle and his son, aided by Flush Fred and Charley Wynne, picked up the dead girl and carried her away, followed by General Brayham.

They left the others engaged in adding to the pile of dry wood, and Daniel Maybury had just lighted a torch.

In a few minutes there was a bright blaze behind them, and the bearers quickened their steps.

The ruins of the old house were nearly burned out when they left there, and the remains of John Martin and his son had been carefully and reverently buried, and the place of interment marked.

A litter had been prepared, on which the corpse of Sue Maybury was borne to the glade, where they all mounted their horses, except the men who were to help the negroes carry the body.

"You and I, major," said Flush Fred, "had better ride on ahead with Mr. Maybury and break the news to the people of the house."

When the three men reached Rose Lawn they found everybody up and waiting, as anxious expectation had not permitted them to sleep.

"We succeeded," said the planter, in response to questions that were asked with the eyes, rather than the lips. "The gang is cleaned out. All those scoundrels are dead."

"Did you find my sister?" faintly asked Mary Maybury.

"We did," and the tones left her no hope that Sue was alive, if she had cherished any.

"He had murdered her."

"And my husband—is he dead, too?" asked Mrs. Muggridge.

"He is dead."

"Did you hang him? Where is he now?"

"I do not know where he is now."

"His body, I mean. Where is that?"

"His body is—ashes."

She covered her face with her hands, hurried to the room that had been assigned to her, and shut herself in.

Soon the others arrived with the body of Sue Maybury, which was tenderly cared for by the good people at Rose Lawn.

"This is the end of her romance, poor dear!" said Mary, as she wept at the side of her dead sister.

The next morning Mrs. Muggridge was bright and cheerful, because she was going home to her child.

She left Rose Lawn that day, provided with a liberal contribution from the enemies of her late husband.

Fred Henning and his wife also soon left Rose Lawn, in their family carriage, with General Brayham and the nurse and baby.

Before they went they left with Major Chappelle authority to dispose of the Grosse Tete tract.

None of the former owners wanted anything more to do with it.

"This has been a sad experience, Fred," said Kate when they had reached their home.

"Very sad, my dear; but I am glad that I no longer have a double."

THE END.

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